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# African Womanhood in Zimbabwean Literature

## New Critical Perspectives on Women's Literature in African Languages



Z. Mguni   M. Furusa  
R. Magosvongwe [eds]

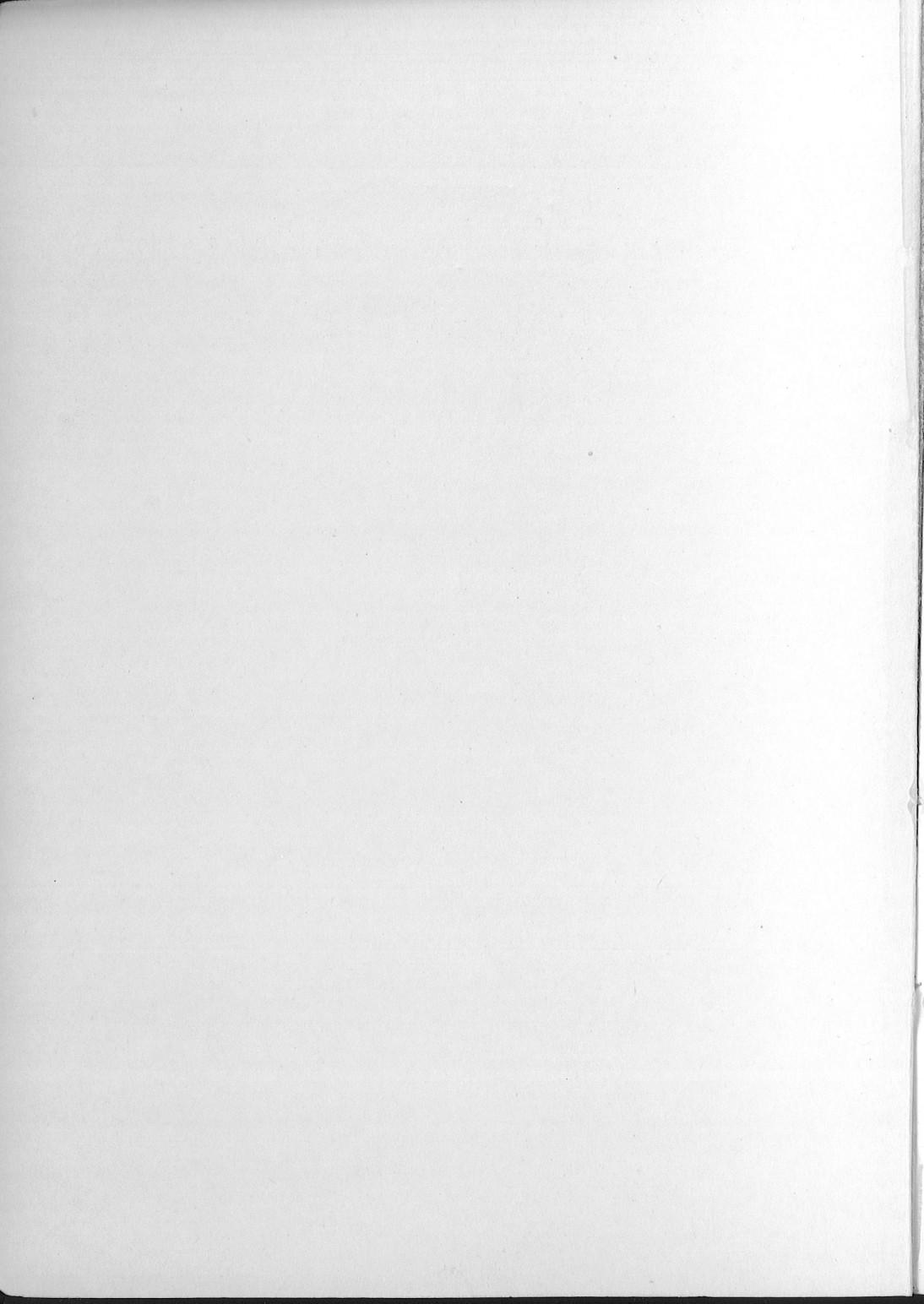


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# African Womanhood in Zimbabwean Literature:

**New critical perspectives on women's  
literature in African languages**

**Edited by**

**Zifikile Mguni, Munashe Furusa and Ruby Magosvongwe**

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co-edited books on culture and development, and indigenous knowledge systems and was a member of the jury for Africa's 100 Best Books of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and Zimbabwe's 75 Best Books Project. She is the current editor-in-chief of the University of Zimbabwe's humanities journal, *Zambezia*.

# **Introduction**

## **Zifikile Mgundi, Munashe Furusa and Ruby Magosvongwe**

There has been no systematic study of black Zimbabwean women's literature produced in indigenous languages. Most critical attention has been reserved for Zimbabwean women writers who write in English. For instance, Tsitsi Dangarembga and Yvonne Vera have dominated both national and international critical discourses on politics of gender and gender representation by virtue of their writing in English. This critical preference for works published by Zimbabwean writers in English continues to marginalize and silence voices that name women's presence and negotiate for performance space in indigenous languages. This collection of critical essays, therefore, helps to redefine both Zimbabwean literature generated by women as well as the place that women should occupy. In many ways, this anthology offers a fresh and 'corrective' notion about the status of Zimbabwean women as well as their conceptions about gender.

The essays in this anthology attempt to give Zimbabwean women's writings in indigenous languages some distinctive space and a life of their own. Also, rather than polarize and fragment scholarship on Zimbabwean women's writings, the project highlights the need for complementarity in the study of the interdisciplinary discourse of gender. The critics, therefore, offer male and female critical perspectives to the literature and the culture that undergird its content. As has been observed by Filomina Steady (in Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, 2003:xiv),

For [African] women, the male is not "the other" but part of the human same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole. Neither sex is totally complete in itself to constitute a unit by itself.

The book thus affirms the complementary nature of masculinity and femininity in the African worldview, that sees both men and women rising with a unified voice to fight challenges that demean their humanity.

This anthology is also unique in that both critics and writers are indigenous to Zimbabwe and are cultural and language 'insiders'. As p'Bitek (1986:37) observes,

It is only the participants in a culture who can pass judgment on it. It is only they who can evaluate how effective the song or dance is; how the decoration, the architecture, the plan of the village has contributed to the feast of life; how these have made life meaningful!

The book therefore offers an important case study of the historical, cultural and theoretical factors and trends that have shaped both the literature and its criticism.

Similarly, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (1994:44) argues that literature reflects and mirrors society in a complex and dialectical way because it is a 'social document, a record of existing social facts and realities of life that can be used in the study of women and society'. The reader's challenge, therefore, is to interrogate the different modes and debates as well as the different levels of critical consciousness the critical essays show.

The different theoretical approaches that the critics use demystify partisan notions relating to the different perspectives this literature offers. All the chapters acknowledge sexual differences and gender disparities in the Zimbabwean society. The common thread that runs through all the chapters is the specific cultural contexts within which these literary texts were produced and generated.

A number of contributors demonstrate a keen interest to study the Zimbabwe Women Writers' (ZWW) literary projects, an indication of their sensitivity to the challenges contemporary Zimbabwe must contend with. It also indicates their commitment to see Zimbabwe mobilize intellectual talent to solve current issues rather than to wallow in self-pity without taking practical steps to humanize their society. For example, the contributors are all in agreement that, 'It is empowering for women to have their own space in the economic sphere, not only in the domestic sphere' (Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, 2003:63). They arrive at this conclusion after exploring gender disparities within the Zimbabwean society. A quick survey of the critics' contributions will help to support the foregoing arguments.

Munashe Furusa's chapter focuses on the historical factors that have contributed towards the dehumanization of Zimbabwean women and also shaped their struggles to recreate themselves. It observes that the reconstruction of African womanhood in Zimbabwean women's literature is crippled by racist myths and stereotypes produced by western social

anthropologists and missionaries, and perpetuated by colonial (Rhodesian) publishing institutions.

Bevelyn Dube's chapter argues that Barbara Makhala's patriarchal gaze in the representation of her female characters limits the potentialities of women in the Zimbabwean society. She encourages women writers to be innovative in their portrayal of female characters in the interests of social change and development.

Zifikile Mguni stresses the activism of Zimbabwean women as shown in the Zimbabwe Women Writers' poetry anthology *Inkondlo*. The women writers in question attempt to offer alternatives to some challenges that are peculiar to their Zimbabwean background. She emphasizes the need for women writers to appreciate the cultural and historical forces that have informed gender related issues in Zimbabwe.

Ruby Magosvongwe utilizes cultural criticism to discuss gender representation and women's empowerment in *Masimba*, a Shona short story anthology produced by Zimbabwe Women Writers (ZWW). She seeks to demonstrate that Zimbabwean Shona women writers use their traditional knowledge systems and concepts to frame their discourse on women's struggles for freedom and equality. She specifically refers to the Shona cultural concepts of *bembera*, *jikinyira* and *mavingu* as mechanisms that provided Shona women with discursive space for voicing their experiences and critiquing patriarchal tendencies.

Memory Chirere provides a comparative analysis of Shona modern and traditional poetry produced by women. He observes that the former poetry shies away from love and sex while the latter is uninhibited. He concludes that Shona women poets use 'the male persona' to express their understanding of, and attitude towards love and male-female relationships. Chirere's light-hearted challenge to Shona women writers is that they be more direct and explicit in their love poetry.

Francis Matambirofa seeks to unmask the foreign feminist agenda hidden in the foreign-sponsored Zimbabwe Women Writers' literary project, *Ngatisimuke: Nhapitapi Yenhorimbo*. He argues that such projects unwittingly negate the idea of indigenous women writers liberating themselves from the influences of foreign ideologies as they succumb to the dictates of their paymaster.

Rosemary Moyana's analysis of selected female-authored Shona novels uses the Marxist philosophy of the material conditions that has seen

the subtle manipulation of the girl child to gratify patriarchal egotistic tendencies. In the same breath, she also highlights gender disparities arising from these tendencies.

Maurice Vambe argues that narratives that privilege nation and nationhood legitimize discourses that silence women's voices and trivialize women's issues. He demonstrates the many ways in which the larger national and social agenda of hegemonic control over women has been manipulated to permeate even the women's writings themselves.

Tommy Matshakayile-Ndlovu focuses on the continued reproduction of stereotypical characters in Ndebele women's literature. He argues that such stereotypes reinforce Ndebele women's culturally constructed roles and patriarchal attitudes that perpetuate women's oppression.

Mickias Musiyiwa adopts a chronological analysis of women's poetry in the early anthologies of Shona poetry. He observes that the concerns these female poets explore appear to be quite limited. Perhaps this is an indication of the limitations these writers may have faced as a result of the prevailing social and political ideologies.

Samukele Hadebe examines gender relations in the novel, *Umhlaba Lo!* He is concerned with the portrayal of colonial Ndebele women who were forced by hostile conditions to leave the countryside in search of new possibilities in the city. He argues that the urban women's fate was sealed by the colonial administration and its machinations to divide the African family.

Rambisai Ruth Kandawasvika-Chivandikwa examines two Zimbabwe Women Writers' short-story anthologies, *Vus' Inkophe* and *Masimba*, written in Ndebele and Shona respectively. She embraces the womanist theory that argues for the humanization of social institutions, thereby foregrounding the need for co-operation within African communities in order to initiate social reform and promote familial harmony.

Rudo Barbara Gaidzanwa's sociological analysis of Zimbabwean women's writings also foregrounds *Masimba* and *Vus' Inkophe* as the primary texts. Her objective is to establish thematic and ideological continuities and discontinuities in indigenous Zimbabwean women's literature. She also highlights the challenges Zimbabwean women writers continue to face in their efforts to establish a female literary tradition.

Whilst the focus of the project is on women's writings produced in Zimbabwe's indigenous languages, the project also endeavors to offer insights into the forces that have shaped women's writing in Zimbabwe. The broad

spectrum of contributors also helps to bring a dialogic and all-encompassing debate on the widely contested subject of gender-related discourses. The idea is to break the perceived patriarchal canonicity of Zimbabwean literature.

In conclusion, one needs not overlook the art of writing itself as activism, an aspect that would go a long way in both empowering and positively transforming the Zimbabwean society.

## Works cited

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- Ogundipe-Leslie, Molara, 1994. *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations*, Trenton, Africa World Press.
- p'Bitek, Okot, 1982. *Artist the Ruler*, Kampala, Heinemann Books.

It is the author's hope that this collection of essays will contribute to the study of Mariama Ba's life and work. It is also the author's hope that this book will contribute to the study of the life and work of other African women writers. This book is dedicated to the memory of the late Dr. John Dube, the first president of the African National Congress, and to the memory of Dr. Walter Sisulu, the former president of the African National Congress. They named their son John Dube, the main architect in this colonial project.

organization in which they are grouped, given to women, and the kind of support available to them. In addition, the broader socio-cultural environment and its impact on women's writing is also important. This book thus attempts to examine some of the factors that have influenced women's writing in Zimbabwe, and to explore how women have responded to these influences. It also attempts to examine the relationship between women's writing and other forms of women's expression, such as oral tradition, music, dance, film, theatre, and visual arts.

The book is divided into four main sections. The first section, 'Women's writing in Zimbabwe', provides an overview of women's writing in Zimbabwe from the mid-1980s to the present. The second section, 'Women's writing in the 1980s', focuses on women's writing in the decade immediately preceding independence. The third section, 'Women's writing in the 1990s', focuses on women's writing in the decade immediately following independence. The fourth section, 'Women's writing in the 2000s', focuses on women's writing in the decade immediately following the mid-1990s peace agreement.

The book is divided into two main parts. Part I consists of five chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of women's writing in Zimbabwe. Part II consists of three appendices, each containing a selection of women's writing from the period covered by the book. The appendices include extracts from novels, short stories, poems, and plays, as well as interviews with women writers.

The book is intended to provide a critical analysis of women's writing in Zimbabwe, and to highlight the ways in which women's writing has contributed to the development of Zimbabwean literature. It also aims to demonstrate the importance of women's writing in the struggle for gender equality and social justice, and to encourage further research and discussion of women's writing in Zimbabwe.

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Overall, the focus of the book is on women's writing in Zimbabwe, and on the ways in which women's writing reflects the experiences and perspectives of women in Zimbabwe. The book also attempts to examine some of the factors that have influenced women's writing in Zimbabwe, and to explore how women have responded to these influences.

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# The muse of history and politics of gender representation in Zimbabwean women's literature

Munashe Furusa

## Introduction

This chapter analyzes the literary works produced by Zimbabwean women writers writing in indigenous languages. It specifically focuses on literature produced in Shona and Ndebele, the main indigenous languages in Zimbabwe. Literature produced in indigenous languages has received minimal attention from critics. Where it has received critical attention, it has been discussed outside the framework of the culture and history that undergird its content. This literature, though often appreciated for its theoretical contributions, has not been credited with enriching women's struggles against internal and external sexist and dehumanizing systems. The primary goals of this chapter are therefore to reflect on the historical factors that have contributed towards the dehumanization of Zimbabwean women and also influenced their struggles to recreate themselves. Secondly, it examines ways in which Zimbabwean women writers represent women's experiences. Finally, the chapter examines the dynamics and forces that contribute to the marginalization and abuse of Zimbabwean women. The overall motivation is to determine the extent to which Zimbabwean women writers have used 'the vast resources of African linguistic tradition and values, the poetic styles and idiom of proverbial expression...sacred and secular myth and ritual...[to produce narratives that are uniquely Zimbabwean] in image, reference and tonality' (Michael Thelwell, 1990:9). This analytical perspective enables us to also establish the extent to which Zimbabwean women writers appropriate indigenous languages and recreate narratives that are 'organic to the sensibilities of the culture[s]...they present' (*ibid*).

## Performance space, modes of de-womanization and invention of stereotypes

Helen Tiffin (1993:909) has observed that 'colonialism's discursive and institutional apparatuses obliterated and continue to obliterate the colonized (especially female) body'. The British transformation of Zimbabwean ancestral social space into a 'fundamentally European construct', which they named Rhodesia, after Cecil John Rhodes, the main architect in this colonial project,

involved the distortion and/or erasure of indigenous sexual relationships. The British reproduced and valorized European culture within the colonized Zimbabwean geopolitical and mental spaces, thus systematically transforming the way Zimbabwean men and women experienced their relationships together within time and space to replicate western gender notions and practices. Zimbabwean women were not only relegated to the status of 'outsiders' with no social and political authority, dignity or human rights within this 'Rhodesian performance space', but their humanity was also turned into stereotypical images for continuous abuse. Through their institutionalized textual authority, physical and political restructuring of Zimbabwe, the British inscribed the de-womanization and abuse of the Zimbabwean woman. By reorganizing Zimbabwean geopolitical space into Tribal Trust Lands (TTLs), Purchase Areas, government land, communal and mining areas, cities and towns, the British colonial forces transformed each of these areas into oppressive encasements controlled and policed through western discourses of gender relationships and practices which offered limited possibilities for Zimbabwean women. The colonizing process separated Zimbabwean men and women and reinforced inequalities in the way each gender experienced the colonized environment.

The marginalization of indigenous Zimbabweans is captured in the lamentation of Zenzele's mother in J. Nozipo Maraire's *Zenzele, A Letter for My Daughter* (1996:52), which suggests the twin burdens of gender and racial oppression Zimbabwean women suffered under Rhodesian rule:

[F]or me...Rhodesia was a forbidden country, a white man's play land. There were vast homes, pristine schools, safari parks, and city clubs, but because of my color, I was not permitted to enter there. I was always outside looking in, yearning, and wondering, what does that feel like? What does that taste like?

Similarly, Gay W. Seidman (1984:421) has observed that the colonial society in Zimbabwe 'brought its own gender ideology along with new economic relationships'. This ideology constructed roles that Zimbabwean women were expected to play within the context of established institutions and policies. Seidman further explains that the white settlers' male dominant colonial ideology codified the position of Zimbabwean women into 'minors' under their control and guidance of their fathers and husbands. The ideology found expression in 'Customary Law', which was a set of customs, principles, rules and regulations

developed by the white settlers through their translation of Shona and Ndebele cultural principles, religious beliefs, customs, and practices into social categories and conceptual systems that have their roots in western history and culture. This subjection of indigenous knowledge systems and practices to a colonial project and their use to construct western oppressive discourses has produced a distorted and distorting idea of social realities and gender relationships in Zimbabwe. It further created the basis for 'a continuation of colonialist power through local male agency' (Tiffin, 1993:912).

Schools, churches and other political and economic policies and institutions sought to produce Zimbabwean people who internalized the 'invented' notions of their customs and traditions, and used them to perpetuate the denigration and abuse of women. Marginalized from the Euro-constructed performance spaces, Zimbabwean women became victims of 'a deeply classed and gendered Anglo-imperialism' (*ibid*:113). The settlers' western colonial imagination enforced gender categories and inequalities that supported labour principles and an epistemological order that made these inequalities possible. Over time, Ndebele's and Shona's flexible gender constructions, where 'daughters could become sons and consequently male', and where 'daughters and women in general could be husbands and consequently male', were replaced with western rigid categories based on 'biological sex' (Ifi Amadiume, 1987:15). Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997:x) has argued that African based social categories were replaced by those based on a 'bio-logic', which is pervasive in the West's use of 'biology as an ideology for organizing...[the] social world'. Western biological determinism textualy restructured fluid and dynamic Ndebele and Shona cultural representations into rigid gender categories based on the colonized 'female' body. In Shona, all the people on my mother's side including males are responsible for 'mothering' me. This means that my mother's sisters, brothers and all the male and female children of her brothers are my 'mothers'. Similarly, all my father's brothers and sisters are responsible for 'fathering' me. The Shona worldview is organized around the concept of *hukama* - a concept that designates a series of complex and harmonious relationships and experiences that cross familial biological boundaries.

Colonialism bracketed the Zimbabwean woman into restricted roles of wife and mother. Her performance space was the home, with her major staging area as the kitchen. She had restricted access to colonial education, and when she was lucky to get an opportunity, she was channeled into academic programmes that 'fitted Western gender ideology - teaching and nursing - traditionally reserved for women in the West' (Seidman, 1984:22). The colonial

system of 'passes' and 'permits' indicated racial and gender identity and allowed supervised boundary-crossings. Teresa Barnes (1997:64) observes that in colonial Zimbabwe, while whites, African men and boys had to carry *zvitupa*, African women were exempted from the pass laws as signification of their inferior status. She also observes that Zimbabwean women's 'economic and spatial mobility was curtailed because the codification of the colonial inventions of tradition boxed them into a state of permanent legal minority' (*ibid*). She further argues that 'throughout the colonial era, an African woman had the same status of a child, for her whole life, irrespective of her education, finances or marital status' (*ibid*). Mrs. Stella Sondai, cited by Teresa Barnes (*ibid*:64) explains that,

[A woman] was not allowed to have a bank account: your brother's name had to be written [on the bank book]. Yes!...you had to put a man's name. "Where would a woman get money from?" [they would ask]...it had to be in your father's or brother's name. A man's name, not a woman's. If your husband died and you didn't have a son you had problems. "A woman doesn't own anything," [the relatives would say]...everything you had worked for was theirs and you were left...[with nothing].

This denial of women's rights to own property was in direct violation of the principles and practices of, for example, Shona culture in which the only person who owns private property is the woman. Whatever my mother owns belongs to her. No member of the Furusa family, including her children, has a right to it. We only have the privilege to share it with her while she is living. On the other hand, whatever our father owns belongs to the whole family, including our mother. Therefore, by denying Zimbabwean women the right to own property, subjecting them to discriminating principles of labour, and restricting the enactment of their presence in the rural areas, colonialism endowed African men with formal control over African women. The Rhodesian colonial system legally defined and designated an inferior status to black women in Zimbabwe. According to Teresa Barnes (*ibid*), 'under these circumstances, African men and the colonial state fitfully cooperated with each other in a new exploitation of women'.

Ida B. Wells, quoted in bell hooks' *Killing Rage, Ending Racism* (1995:77), explains why colonial officials found it important to de-womanize and devalue black women:

Among the many things that have transpired to dishearten the... [Africans] in their effort to attain a level in the status of civilized races, has been the wholesale contemptuous defamation of [black] women.

This colonial devaluation and de-womanization of the Zimbabwean women re-invented stereotypes of primitiveness, backwardness and barbarity which gained currency during 'slavery and poisoned, perhaps forever, the wellsprings of...[African] humanity' (Chinua Achebe, 2000:5). These resilient stereotypes formed the cornerstone of a new discourse about Ndebele and Shona cultural beliefs and practices and their reconstruction of womanhood. Zimbabwean indigenous culture was demonized as highly sexist and patriarchal. It was presented as highly oppressive and abusive to women. This new discourse, that derives from western racist perceptions and reconstructions of African people and their cultures, identifies patriarchy as the main problem in Zimbabwe. Patriarchy subordinates women's interests to men's, and therefore places Zimbabwean women in the service of men. Zimbabwean women feature in this discourse as voiceless, ignorant, dependent and naïve individuals atrophied, disempowered, and dehumanized by the male dominant culture and its rule of fathers and their sons. According to Seidman (1984:421-2), Zimbabwean women were used as 'objects of exchange between lineage groups' and '*lobola* payment gave husbands control over their wives'. She further argues that, 'polygamy was common, and multiple wives was considered a sign of the man's status'. Seidman's concern, here, is to argue for victimization and enslavement of Zimbabwean women by what she considers to be a backward 'traditional culture'. She re-invents Zimbabwean cultures as savagery, the western inferior 'Other'. She sees and positions everything in Zimbabwe within normative codes of western discourses. Zenzele's mother (in Nozipo Maraire, 1996:32) dismisses these discourses as,

...Western anthropologists' view of our culture. They perceive our customs through their lens. They are terms and customs that cannot be translated adequately into their language and so become distorted. *Lobola* is called a 'bride price', kings are 'chiefs', our medicine is

called ‘witchcraft’ and our religion is called ‘animist’. They don’t capture the spirit of our culture.

Zimbabwean women writers began writing within this ‘performance space’, controlled and directed by colonial forces, institutions and discourses. Having been socialized within colonial mission schools or in the West, Zimbabwean women writers, like their male counterparts, confront the fundamental task of breaking with hegemonic perspectives and racist constructs. Their major challenge is to separate the composite image of the Zimbabwean woman constructed through western reductive representational discourses from the living Zimbabwean women, ‘real, material subjects of their collective history’ (Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 2003:19), perceived and constructed within ‘the spirit of our culture’ (Maraire, 1996:32). This task is hampered by the fact that many Zimbabweans internalized the discourse of the oppressor with its linear and racist historiography that presents western culture as progressive and modern, while defining everything African as backward and traditional. Stanley Nyamfukudza, a Zimbabwean novelist and short story writer, confesses that he has thoroughly internalized the colonial experience and that it has become his normal way of life. He is convinced that European values wiped out memories of his Shona childhood and cultural knowledge systems:

This is the way I live, that is the way people around me live and whatever set of morals is operating arises out of that kind of existence in that particular society at that time (in Flora Veit-Wild, 1992:160).

Another Zimbabwean novelist, dramatist and poet, Dambudzo Marechera, connects his Euro-conditioned mentality to his western education:

[The] education I received...was English. Sometimes I don’t even know whether what I’m thinking or feeling is my own...or simply something I acquired as a result of my study of English literature (in Flora Veit-Wild 1988:10).

Seduced by western education and civilization, Marechera rejects both his ‘mother tongue’ and indigenous culture. He proudly claims that, ‘When I came here [to Zimbabwe] from England..., I could not understand everything Shona speaking people were saying’ (in Veit-Wild, 1992:231). His experiences in the

West reduced his Shona experiences to a ‘ghetto demon I was trying to escape’ (in Veit-Wild, 1988:7).

Similarly, many Zimbabwean women writers found themselves disconnected from their ‘mother tongues’ and indigenous knowledge systems by the burdens of colonial experiences. Jane Munyota believed that she could only effectively voice her experiences in English because her own indigenous language was not complex enough to carry her experiences (Veit-Wild, 1992:233). In the same vein, Yvonne Vera celebrates what she considers to be the universal and timeless value of the English language. She states that, ‘Shona is incongruous...English has the ability to capture things. It adapts to different places’ (in Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga, 2002:223).

In the 1950s, the Rhodesian Literature Bureau, which published literature in indigenous languages, played a crucial role in controlling the nature and development of Zimbabwean literature. The Bureau not only determined which books were to be published, but also performed various evaluative functions that contributed towards the construction of a Zimbabwean literary canon. More importantly, the Literature Bureau as a ‘publishing empire’ with total rights over literature in indigenous languages, was visibly connected to the British colonial interests in Zimbabwe. According to Flora Veit-Wild (1992:73),

The Literature Bureau...organized writers’ workshops to teach writing skills. Here, just as in the written authors’ guides, European mentors instructed African writers in the art of writing a novel, short story or poetry following conventional British models of writing from 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

English literature was presented as the normative canon that facilitated Rhodesian authorities’ control of the scope and aesthetic vision of Zimbabwean literature, especially in indigenous languages. Tsitsi Dangarembga (in Rosemary, Marangoly George et al, 1993:312) explains that the Literature Bureau authorized the publication of ‘tales of traditional witchcraft, wives poisoning their husbands,...[T]hat was the only cognitive map that the forces in power then were allowing us to construct’. Flora Veit-Wild (1992:1) confirms this western hegemonic control of the Zimbabwean people’s right to voice their own cultural truth. She states that, ‘colonial rule and isolation from the rest of Africa brought a specific quality in Zimbabwean literature’. She adds that, the ‘foundations

for written literature were laid by the missionaries who transcribed the Bible and other religious texts into vernaculars and subsequently taught Africans to read and write themselves' (*ibid*:6). She further observes that, 'the majority of Shona and Ndebele writers were constrained and repetitive in theme and style, imitating their predecessors, centering their fictions mostly around the ever-recurring themes of culture clash and moral decay in the cities (*ibid*:246). With the Literature Bureau as an established gate-keeper and enforcer of European colonial and textual authority, Zimbabwean writers were denied the opportunity to seriously examine their environment, engage their lived cultural and historical experiences and combine them with their personal creative insights. They were forced to mediate their colonial experiences through the intellectual lens of the colonial institutions. Charles Mungoshi (1990, Unpublished:5) summarizes the impact of institutionalized control on Zimbabwean literature when he states that,

The city was the villain, in most of our stories, and not the white man who had brought the town into our rural lives. And the city had nothing to do with the whites, no. The city was the slums and the ghettos where only blacks lived. We didn't see the poor lives in the ghettos, the drinking, whoring, killings as having anything to do with the prejudiced rule of the white man, even if we saw it, we were not allowed to bring it out in our stories. We wrote as if the white man didn't exist.

This imposed ghettoized literary gaze and sensibility kept Zimbabwean conversations about their realities within an orbit of colonizing discourses and grand narratives. The colonizing project required these atavistic images to reinforce the West's claim to racial superiority. By forcing Zimbabwean writers to exclude a morally edifying Shona and Ndebele past and their political responses to colonization, the Literature Bureau deprived Zimbabwean literature of a historical and cultural context 'independent of persistent projections, or inversions, of European racial presumption'. Ultimately, Zimbabweans were forced to 'lionize Europe's caviling political mission around the globe' (Joseph C. Miller, 1999:6-8).

### **Zimbabwean women and the role of the female artist**

In spite of all the impediments described above, Zimbabwean women writers committed themselves to recreating stories of their circumscribed humanity

and brought their lives into the centre of the Zimbabwe social space. In their writings they promoted the rights of women to reincarnate their silenced voices. According to Tsitsi Dangarembga (in Carol Boyce Davies, 1995:29), the main source of women's writings is their 'consciousness of being a woman and the problems that arise as a result of that'. She explains that Zimbabwean women reconstruct 'things...[they have] observed and...[have] had direct experience with', but 'larger than any one person's own tragedies' (ibid:190). Her novel, *Nervous Conditions*, recreates a 'very real taste of life during the times that I grew up'. Her goal was to develop a 'cognitive map' that Zimbabwean women would find comfortable to live within (Dangarembga, in Rosemary, Marangoly George et al, 1993:311). She believes that Zimbabwean women have a responsibility 'to write about ourselves in our own voice which other people can pick up and read' (ibid:312). Dangarembga further argues that,

[A] woman's consciousness does have to define its position in society in terms of how much power women have and how much power women do not have. It has to be informed by the conditions of that society (ibid:315).

She believes that women's issues can only be fully understood and adequately addressed within a historical and cultural context. For this reason, she disagrees with other Zimbabwean women writers and critics who search for liberating ideas and concepts within western theoretical frameworks. She proposes that Zimbabwean writers and critics should define their own structure of gender relations instead of relying on western feminist thought. She argues that western-derived feminism is,

so alien to the thinking of many black women because it...[comes] from a foreign culture, that they...[are] not even able to assimilate it to the extent where it would give them that initial liberation which...[is] necessary as something to start building on' (ibid:315-16).

Her part of the world has produced its own cultural values and principles that are able to provide such a philosophical foundation for liberation.

Some Zimbabwean women's literary associations provide a model for women's literary empowerment. The Zimbabwe Women Writers (ZWW), which was formed in 1990, ten years after Zimbabwe attained political independence,

provides women with a platform to express their concerns through the use of literary images. Their objectives are to promote the publication of women's writing and to promote the reconstruction of 'positive' images of women through their literary works. Faith F. Chimharanda, a member of ZWW, challenges women to fight the new wars with pen-points. Her poem 'Hondo yamadzimai' (Women's war) (2004) celebrates ZWW's publications as material proof of women's creative ability. Eplin Mutemeri's 'Svinura mwanasikana' (Open your eyes girl) (2004) is a call to action and 'sisterhood'. Her work challenges women to come together and use the creative talents to forge a vision that is relevant to the development of Zimbabwe. Therefore, ZWW represents a coming together of women, the breaking down of artificially constructed barriers and the beginning of a coalescing into a strong voice of vision and inspiration for women and for the nation. Mutemeri explains that women writers have the responsibility to explain, inform and interpret Zimbabwean experiences. To adequately do so, the poem suggests, women have to heal themselves from the effects of the dehumanizing effects of male chauvinism and regain their self-esteem and self-confidence. The poem exhibits a sharp awareness of the fact that systems of oppression often lead to self-negation and diminished self-worth. Thus, writing is an essential therapeutic act for women who have suffered various forms of marginalization.

Yvonne Vera (in Robert Muponde et al, 2002:220) argues that women writers have an obligation to produce works that embody,

[the] story of spirituality, of ancestors, a mystic consciousness and a history...out of my consciousness of being African, as though...[we] were...[ourselves] a spirit medium, ...just transferring or conveying symbols and images of that [Africanness].

Vera proposes that Zimbabwean women's literature should aim to reconstruct an 'internal, intimate knowledge of our ancestors, and how they impact on our relationship to ourselves' (*ibid*:220); that they should write about a particular woman, an African woman and how she is 'forced to endure without a nervous breakdown – because [she] cannot afford it' (*ibid*: 223); and to narrate the 'biographies of unknown women...in our national history, so that they are always against the background of a particular time (*ibid*). Her strategy for repossessing the Zimbabwean narrative from the hegemonic claws of British

patriarchal intellectual authority is, as Wole Soyinka (1964:39) puts it, to 'leave the dead some room to dance'.

The goals outlined by Zimbabwean women writers cited above indicate a strong desire to unmask the pain and trauma of marginalized African womanhood, to give voice to all the women who have been silenced by their circumstances, and to carve out 'performance space' within the national space. Their articulated programme of action is to disrupt the colonial project and its gendered policies and politics. This women led project requires repossessing Zimbabwe as a geopolitical and socio-historical space and restoring it as an arena for the interplay of male and female forces with complementary responsibilities.

bell hooks (1993:19) reminds us that for such a project to succeed we must 'speak the truth of our lives'. Quoting M. Scott Peck (*ibid*:19-20), she argues that the major impediment to the restoration of wholeness for the black woman 'is invariably an interlocking system of lies we have been told and lies we have told ourselves'. 'Speaking the truth' involves recollection of socio-historical memories of lived experiences through reconstructive research. African wisdom warns that a river that forgets its source creates a dry path. When images seeded in one's cultural memory fade, one's imagination, searching for images of self in foreign territories outside the principles of one's culture, creates 'an artificial past, a defunct cosmology without...[cultural] faith' (Derek Walcott, 1998:44). Forgetful individuals look up to foreign anthropology for a catalogue of forgotten gods, for fragments of their historical memory and philosophical direction.

The next section of the chapter examines images of the Zimbabwean woman produced by women writers as part of the project of self-reconstruction and self-representation. It discusses their understanding of the historical and cultural factors that have shaped the destiny of the Zimbabwean woman.

## **Zimbabwean women writers and the reconstruction of the Zimbabwean woman**

Flora Veit-Wild records that the first literary works by Zimbabwean women writers in indigenous languages were a Ndebele novel, *Qaphela Ingane* (1962) and a collection of folktales, *Ngano Dzepasi Chigare* (1964) by Lassie Ndondo and Jane Chifamba, respectively. These were followed in the 1970s and 1980s by other female writers like Joyce Simango, Barbara Makhalisa, Juliana Lwanda and Ketinah Muringaniza. From the 1990s to the present, ZWW has provided

the dominant voice and perspective in the discourse on gender relationships in Zimbabwe. Hence, titles by Zimbabwean women in indigenous languages have increased since independence. A survey of this literature from the mid 1960s to the present reveals that the dominant theme is that of Zimbabwean women struggling to cope with an oppressive environment that is rapidly changing. The writers draw attention to the widespread abuse of Zimbabwean women by Zimbabwean men whose patriarchal authority colludes with colonial forces to disempower them. The enduring image of the Zimbabwean woman is that of a victim, the outside 'other' who is as much a victim of 'tradition' as she is a victim of the changed/changing environment. The Zimbabwean woman is often portrayed as helpless and hopeless, abused and de-womanized. Her talents are undervalued and disrespected. Her desires are frustrated and marginalized, and she often gets ostracized for stepping out of the boundaries of her socially constructed roles and responsibilities. She is lonely, unfulfilled, voiceless, dependent, and gullible. She is sometimes conflated with the fate of the country – Zimbabwe - raped and abused by her children.

The first generation of women writers' 'voicing' was generally restricted to the domestic space of marriage, home, children and family issues. Even the women's performances outside the domestic space, for example, in the city or in career settings, were mediated through the lens of socially prescribed roles as mothers and as wives or in relation to the Zimbabwean man's abuse or failure to live up to his socially constructed role as a provider, protector and decision maker. Their women characters do not break out of the 'traditional' careers such as teaching and nursing. Examples are Dambudziko in Sharai Mukonoweshuro's *Ndakagara Ndazviona* (1990), who is a nurse, and the school teacher, Musa, in Barbara Makhala's *Umendo* (1977). Women like Lifile in Sithembile Mlilo's *Lifile* (1975) who migrate to the city are often interpreted through a moralism that supports master texts. Their journeys and 'border-crossings' are not seen as forms of 'insurgency' in the enemy territory as women take advantage of their not being required to have identity documents to cross and re-cross colonial borders. They redefine performances within spaces and renegotiate opportunities and possibilities for women's existence in Zimbabwe. Such women who 'transgress' the various spaces bounded by colonial authority are presented as immoral elements that writers, acting in support of colonial authority, destroy with all kinds of diseases and all forms of violence. They become desperate prostitutes who fight over men in the city. These reconstructions perpetuate stereotypical images of women. They present

the woman as the scapegoat of all ills in the society. The writers blame the victims of an inhuman system rather than investigate that very system and its architects. Juliana Lwanda believes that women cause all the evil in the world:

If murder cases are scrutinized, it will always directly or indirectly involve a woman. Women and alcohol and money always together form their league much to man's misery in the end (survey:74).

The fact that Lwanda reduces the Zimbabwean women to the same status with alcohol and money is instructive of how an internalized male dominant ideology cripples efforts to recreate women into the centre of human discourses. It is also an expression of a pervasive inability to adequately embrace the story and its context in order to produce narrative possibilities that offer counter discourses to colonial patriarchal hegemonic textuality and practices. Makhalisa explains that many women writers in Zimbabwe reproduce what,

society has brainwashed us women into thinking. You will be surprised to find how many women think the blame lies with them because society, tradition has taught us that we women are to blame always, it is man who is to blame (Makhalisa Interview, 1985:2).

There is a disconnect between this pronouncement and her portrayal of women. The aesthetic and political vision of her works projects this very mentality that she criticizes other women writers for. In the quotation above, Makhalisa blames men for the 'tradition' that 'domesticates' women and paralyzes their independent thinking. Aunts, mothers-in-law and other older women are condemned for reinforcing these oppressive traditions and therefore making life difficult for younger and 'modern' women who want to break out of prescribed roles.

The majority of both early and later Zimbabwean women writers, echo this sentiment. Ketinah Muringaniza views indigenous cultural traditions as responsible for all the problems. She argues that,

In our culture, a woman becomes a puppet in many spheres: 1) In the family she is considered to be an inferior child to the brother who will later become a legal guardian regardless of age. 2) When married she practically becomes a piece of property that is supposed to be tossed

around, mistreated or even manhandled without voicing her discontent from all quarters: husband, in-laws and other relatives. 3) If professional, at work she faces unequal treatment and is sneered at if she tries to be too challenging by all sexes, especially from those of her sex. (ibid).

According to Muringaniza, women are disrespected in every sector of society. She views Shona culture as sexist and abusive to women. Joyce Simango's *Zviuya Zviri Mberi* (1974) is a voice against the disrespect and disregard for women's rights through what she perceives to be 'the custom of pledging daughters'. Munhamo's husband is senseless, self-centered and sexist. He does not care about his wives' well being. Munhamo's courageous and sustained struggle to protect her daughter from being 'pledged' to a man she does not love suggests new possibilities and represents agency. Her action is a challenge to an oppressive system, hence her husband's bitterness and anger. He believes that *roora/loholo* gives him total possession of his wives. Having dismissed Shona culture as oppressive and dehumanizing, Joyce Simango turns to Christian values for the protection and fulfillment of Munhamo's daughter. The daughter is eventually married in a Christian way. Missionaries provide a sanctuary for Zimbabwean women tormented by de-womanizing customs and traditions. Makhalisa proposes a similar sanctuary for her female characters. Families and marriages that fail are those that are based on Ndebele traditions while those that succeed are based on Christian traditions. The families that are fragmented by colonial labour policies are also restored through Christianity. Flora Veit-Wild (1992:247) attributes this Christian moralization to the fact that,

Christianity was a particularly strong force, driving, and guiding women writers in the 1970s. In a situation of rapidly changing values, the Christian religion gave women moral support; it helped them to take a stand, to fight old customs and new habits that allowed men to freely exploit and abuse women.

The logic of Veit-Wild's argument is that Shona and Ndebele female writers find indigenous customs primitive and oppressive, while Christian values are considered modern and democratic. Simango's narrative finally dismisses the possibility of her liberated family experiencing wholeness in Zimbabwe, so they migrate to Europe.

Zimbabwe Women Writers' Ndebele and Shona short story anthologies, *Vus' Inkophe* (1996) and *Masimba* (1996), and Shona poetry anthology, *Ngatisimuke: Nhaphitapi Yenhorimbo* (2004) have been hailed for introducing new themes and broadening their literary gaze to cover national political and social issues, contemporary concerns of HIV/AIDS, legal and property rights, citizenship, and also for introducing professional and educated women. However, their conceptualizations of male/female relationships in Zimbabwe continue the tradition set by the first generation of women writers. They provide the same array of abused women married to husbands who are as jealous as they are unfaithful and disrespectful. The short stories and poetry only penetrate more deeply the private spaces where the pain and trauma that disempowers and keeps women separate are buried. The perpetrator is still the man supported by Shona and Ndebele patriarchal attitudes and cultural traditions. The central voice within the short stories and the poetry is that of an anguished, physically and psychologically traumatized woman, mostly wife and mother. The women break imposed silences to utter the pain and tragic ironies buried in their abused lives and those of their abused daughters. The voices of these women, like those of their foremothers represented by the earlier generation of Zimbabwean women writers, have been stripped of dignity and integrity. They have been shamed, humiliated and betrayed by their boyfriends, husbands and fathers. Most of the women's abuses are experienced within the institution of marriage. Widowed and divorced, women are also very vulnerable to the abuse of male authority.

Black men are portrayed as monsters, adulterers, child molesters, unloving, deceitful, hypocritical, and generally insensitive. Keresia Chateuka's poem, 'Ndodzungaira' (I'm suffering) presents the tormented voice of a married woman whose husband constantly beats, rapes and verbally abuses her. She confesses,

Chibharo kwave kudyakwezuva

Wazvindikitwa, mashoko saga nehafu

Rudo rwangove hundu hundi yoga yoga

Mukadzi, ndakaparei? (48)

Rape is a daily occurrence

You are beaten and verbally abused

Love no longer has value

What crime has a woman committed?

Her salvation lies in ‘voicing’, in articulating her private pain within a public space. The poem becomes the vehicle for publicizing both the abuse and the physical and psychological wounds that she has silently carried for a long time. The persona celebrates her repossession of her power to voice her life. Her voice transcends the personal pain to claim freedom for all women:

Ini ndicharamba ndichishamatata

“Rusununguko! Rusununguko!

Kumunhukadzi” (49).

I will continue to shout

“Freedom! Freedom!

To Women.”

Tendai Mupaya captures the lamentation of another married woman whose life has been drained away by her abusive husband. Her withered body bears testimony to what an abusive marriage can do to women. Her husband has become abuse incarnate hence she addresses herself to ‘Rushusho’ (Abuse). Pelda Hove’s ‘Baba here!’ (Why my father!) presents another version of a woman’s tormented spirit, only this time it takes the form of a young girl who has been raped by her father. She speaks directly to her father using the interrogative technique. It is a technique that seeks to prick the heart and mind of the father. She directs her father to the various areas of her life that have been forever shattered by that act of reckless brutality. She wants the father to tell her how she is going to relate to her mother, how she is going to live with him now that he has become a monster, and how she will respect him when her heart has been wounded. She concludes by inviting the father to kill her. One cannot help but hate the father for violating fatherly responsibility and trust.

Peggy Rusike recreates the experiences and feelings of a widowed woman who suffers a double tragedy of losing her husband and everything that they had acquired together. The poem ‘Handina changu’ (I have nothing) addresses the practice of *kugara nhaka*, commonly referred to as inheritance. The woman’s voice in the poem narrates how she worked hard to acquire

property, only to lose everything to her husband's greedy relatives who use the authority of tradition to dispossess her. She questions the fairness of a practice that dispossesses the person who sacrificed all in order to provide for her children, just because she is a woman. Pelda Hove in 'Nhaka' (Inheritance) directly tackles the same issue of inheritance addressed rather indirectly by Rusike. Her message is clearly that a woman is not a thing to be passed on from one man to another. The voice of the widowed woman in the poem declares that,

Haisiri hanzu inokuuriranwa  
Kana pfuko yedoro inosvitsanwa  
Handisi mukonde wesadza unosiiranwa (58).

A woman is not a piece of cloth to be passed on  
Or a pot of beer to be shared  
She is not a plate of sadza to be passed.

This is a bold voice that challenges any attempts to dehumanize her under the pretext of some cultural tradition. According to this voice, inheritance is a custom that promotes greed and abuse of women.

The short story anthologies, *Vus' Inkophe* and *Masimba*, narrate the stories of lonely, deprived and disrespected married women. 'Asihambe ekhaya mntakwethu' (Let's go home, my friend) paints the picture of an irresponsible and adulterous man, Khoza, who neglects his wife and children while spending his money with his girlfriends. Xoli, another married woman in the same story, suffers the same fate. Many such abused women end up seeking divorce. Virginia Phiri's 'Ndangariro dzefambi' (Memories of a prostitute) follows the experiences of one such woman who runs away from an abusive husband and ends up a prostitute in order to make ends meet. Her life is one long relentless story of suffering. One gets the impression that whether in marriage or outside, women still suffer.

While Zimbabwean women came together as ZWW to search for a collective vision and solution to women's oppression, their characters continue to seek individual solutions to what they regard as a systemic oppressive culture. Their reconstruction of African womanhood is often crippled by racist myths and stereotypes produced by social anthropologists and missionaries, and perpetuated by colonial (Rhodesian) publishing and educational

institutions. Their overall position is that African culture is inherently oppressive and inhuman; that African women have always been powerless, downtrodden; that African men buy women and make them part of their property; and that African women in such a culture cannot own property. They maintain that to humanize and liberate African women from the bondage of their culture, African men and women should seek a culture that is most unlike them, one that is 'modern and universal'. However, the writers make no attempt to explain, in concrete terms, what it is in Ndebele or Shona culture that produces oppressive and domineering men.

## Conclusion

Most of Zimbabwean women writers' representations of relationships between Zimbabwean men and women paint a picture of a culture that unleashes a large-scale, barbaric, and indiscriminate abuse on women. Positive relationships between men and women, strong families experiencing complementary roles between Zimbabwean men and women, sensitive and supportive husbands, fathers and mothers-in-law are very few. Similarly, positive memories regarding Zimbabwean historical and cultural experiences are limited. The writers remember most vividly the dehumanizing tendencies of indigenous cultural traditions. They also recall the healing possibilities enshrined in Christian education and values. Such over-generalizations are 'occasioned by the imposition of Western gender categories on... [African] discourse' (Oyeronke Oyewumi, 1997:ix) on Zimbabwean gender relationships and practices. The Euro-American concepts and perspectives fail to fully explain gender relations in Ndebele and Shona communities in Zimbabwe. They distort and subordinate Zimbabwean women's realities to structures of knowledge that marginalize Ndebele and Shona cultural realities. Nkiru Nzengwu (2003:99) calls western perspectives on gender, 'dramatic sites of violence in which the activities, actions, and humanity of others are violated' and where 'cultural rights and cultural personhood' are denied space.

There is need for creative and ideological shifts in literature on politics of gender in Zimbabwean history and culture(s). According to bell hooks (1992:2), the shift should be part of the 'struggle to break with the hegemonic modes of seeing, thinking, and being that block...[women's] capacity...to imagine, describe, and invent...[themselves] in ways that are liberatory'. Discourses on gender relationships and their representation in Zimbabwean women's literature should be part of the process of re-narrating and re-defining

African womanhood. They should incorporate concepts and expressions deriving from Ndebele and Shona cultural and historical experiences. Emphasis should be placed on the need to unravel the models of African womanhood that would link the experiences of women to collective social interests without constraining women's interests. In regards to literary works, this requires a 'serious engagement with the cultural and material conditions prevailing in...literary texts' and social practices (Nnaemeka, 2004:1). Such an approach would enable Zimbabwean women writers to rescue African womanhood from myths and stereotypes that the West generated to subordinate Zimbabwean women to western patriarchal modes of relationships and economic production.

Zimbabwean writers bear the responsibility to correctly represent Zimbabwean institutions, culture(s) and practices. The challenge lies in recreating the knowledge of Ndebele and Shona beliefs and practices and the complex and multiple gender relationships. Currently, most of the behavior patterns that the writers present as culturally authorized are condemned in the teachings of their communities.

Many African scholars and writers in various parts of Africa and the Americas are already re-examining and renaming notions of 'mothering', 'sisterhood', 'womanhood', and 'gender' and 'sex' in African societies. They use concepts from African knowledge systems as the basis for theorizing the politics of gender in African societies. They also seek to disrupt patriarchy by emphasizing female power and agency rather than victimhood and weakness, and by reconstructing the subtle and complex, 'facets of womanhood and empowerment' in the African world (Jell-Bahlsen 1998:101). Such an approach leads to the understanding of the fact that any structured and functioning human society needs to 'recognize, appreciate, and pursue certain basic values, if it is to survive at all as a human society' (Gyekye, 2004:45); that human beings are different from 'dry leaves, smoke or clouds, which are blown here and there by the wind' (p'Bitek, 1986); and that human beings develop organizations and institutions which are, to a greater extent, shaped and informed by cultural values that derive from a people's lived philosophy of life (Okot p'Bitek, 1986; Kwame Gyekye, 1996). Culture as lived philosophy and a value system regulates social space and social performance existing within it. Ngugi wa Thiongo (1997:11) refers to this social performance as 'representation of being – the coming to be and the ceasing to be of processes in nature, human society, and thought'. Social space is a contested site. It hosts the enactment of various competing political and social interests. Culture directs enactments

and performances within the social space. It outlines privileges, social roles and responsibilities, and regulates boundaries of behaviors and practices within the social space through discourses - stories, proverbs, daily admonitions and teachings, rules and regulations.

The Shona and Ndebele people of Zimbabwe do not separate the concept of culture from the human being. The Shona and Ndebele terms for human being are *munhu* and *umuntu*, respectively. Similarly, culture is *unhu* and *ubuntu*, respectively. Being human means having *umhu/ubuntu* (culture), which insinuates being properly socialized or civilized. The socialization of the members of the community and nation is guided by the prevailing philosophy or worldview of the educational institutions. In Akan language of Ghana, culture refers to upbringing or nurturing. To be human, therefore, is to be cultured. It follows that every people have a culture, a system of beliefs and social principles that they use to socialize and bond their people into a collective community. An individual is born into an existing human society, into an existing culture. Therefore, a person is partly constituted by social relationships in which he or she necessarily finds him or herself. Outside these social relationships, the individual person would not be self-complete and fulfilled. African wisdom also teaches us that a person is not a tree that he or she would be self-sufficient or self-complete. His/her capacities, talents, and dispositions are not adequate for the realization of his or her potential and basic needs. Hence, the Ndebele people say, *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, while the Shona say, *Munhu vanhu*. Both mean that we are the sum total of our social relationships.

Yet, culture is often marginalized, misnamed, and distorted in Zimbabwean literature on gender and gender relationships. According to Nnaemeka (1997), the 'misnaming...is due to laziness (the laziness to discover and know) and arrogance (arrogance to claim authority over issues with which one is not familiar)'. Alienation from one's culture can create a dry spot in one's cultural and historical memory. The foregoing discussion challenges Zimbabwean writers to distinguish between the principles of African culture and reconstructions of African culture and practices produced by the West through the techniques of enslavement and colonization. The various forms of dislocations which Zimbabwean people suffered from a century of British rule dimmed memories of their culture and realities. Therefore, the process of re-imagining and re-inventing Ndebele and Shona womanhood requires thorough and committed research. Re-imagining the future also demands perspectives

that neither subject African realities to old falsities nor invent and market new romanticisms.

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**Bevlyn Dube**

### **Introduction**

I will start with the much hackneyed phrase, 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,' which is very often taken for granted by its users. One might ask how relevant to the subsequent discussion this statement is. Whilst this chapter is not about beauty or how it should be defined, this statement sums up the key points to my argument. Firstly, it defines the act of seeing as more than just a physical act of looking and registering the presence of an object, but also as a mental process of perceiving one's reality. Secondly, it implies that the beholder automatically reconstructs and assigns meaning to an image. Two or more people might see the same image but respond to it differently. For example, the figure of a thin woman might signify beauty and glamour to some individuals, whilst to others it might connote ill-health and ugliness. The reason why we respond differently to the same image is because, very often, our view of the world is determined by our socialization, meaning therefore, that the act of seeing is a socially constructed activity, which can either empower or disempower the on-looker or the object being looked at.

John Berger in his book, *Ways of Seeing* (1972:45), notes that in most films, women have been conditioned to seeing themselves through the masculine eye:

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women, but also the relations between women to themselves. The surveyor of women in herself is male, the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object of vision: a sight...the "ideal" spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of woman designed to flatter.

Although Berger is referring to the world of film, his central observations apply to all forms of art, be they sculpture, painting or literature. According to him, man is the active being privileged with eyes which define the other (that is, the woman) whilst the woman is the object of the man's gaze<sup>1</sup>. The result of all

this is that women have themselves been conditioned to wearing masculine spectacles when looking at themselves. Consciously or unconsciously, the man assumes the position of the 'ideal' viewer and everyone is expected to attune his or her gaze to this ideal. Failure to comply would result in one being deemed a misfit in society.

This is a major challenge women writers have to face in trying to subvert the masculine gaze, which attempts to marginalize the woman and silence her voice. The male gaze objectifies and controls the woman. Ironically, it is this same gaze which renders the woman invisible. One is reminded of Orpheus, the Greek mythological god, whose look at Eurydice, his wife, denied her an opportunity to live again and consigned her to eternal death. Maurice Blanchot (in Peter Hitchcock, 1997:67) describes this look as wanting to see her,

...in her nocturnal darkness, in her distance, her body closed, her face sealed, which wants to see her not when she is visible, but when she is invisible, and not as the intimacy of a familiar life, but as the strangeness of that which excludes intimacy; it does not want to make her live, but to have the fullness of her death living in her.

Implied here, is that Orpheus and men in general are happier when their women remain invisible and passive. I shall examine Barbara Makhala's gaze with a view to establishing through whose eyes she sees the world. Questions such as, 'What informs her gaze?', 'Does her look empower or disempower the woman?', and many others will be explored in this chapter.

### **The black woman in colonial Zimbabwe (Rhodesia)**

A look at Makhala's perception of the status of the black woman in the Ndebele society will be grossly flawed without the interrogation of the colonial environment which informed her vision. Colonial Rhodesia was a highly androcentric society, which put the interests of the colonizer above all else. The colonizer came from a Victorian society, which put emphasis on gender-based divisions of labour, especially amongst its upper and middle classes. The woman's role was to stay at home and look after the children, whilst the burden of providing for the family fell squarely on the man's shoulders. The Victorian novelist, Jane Austen's female characters, in novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* (1983) and *Emma* (1984), preoccupy themselves with capturing a wealthy husband. These women put up poses of fragility so as to arouse in

their men a protective instinct. Outspoken women, who are self.-sufficient are considered as lacking in decorum and, therefore, unsuitable for marriage. This results in their being ostracized in society.

This is the system that the settler government sought to impose on the black society, whose women, up until the coming in of colonialism, were active players in the economies of their societies. Musa Dube in his paper, 'Searching for the lost needle: Double colonization and Post colonial African feminisms', points out that the African worldview was 'more holistic than dualistic' (1999:5). It was the responsibility of both men and women to ensure that their society survived, unlike in the English society where the survival of the family hung on the men. Osirim (2005) argues that, whilst the pre-colonial society was not egalitarian, the roles of women and men were complementary. The African woman was certainly not a wall flower. She played a significant economic role in the well-being of the society. Dube cites Morgan (1984) who shows how, throughout pre-colonial Africa, black women participated actively in the economies of their societies. For example, in Ghana, women were fully involved in the economy as traders and cultivators; in Kenya, Masai and Kikuyu women dominated trade. Elizabeth Schmidt (1992) also shows how Shona women went out hunting with their men and worked alongside them in the iron smelting venture. Kuzwayo (1985) cited by Dube (1999) also argues that Nguni women herded cattle with their men. Cattle amongst the Nguni were the main economic source of livelihood. All this shows that pre-colonial African women were, unlike their English counterparts who left everything to their man, active contributors to their economies.

The coming of colonialism impacted negatively on black women. As Osirim (2005:5) points out, 'settler colonialism in Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) took a severe toll on black women and exacerbated the gender based divisions of labour'. Unfortunately for the black woman, the black man, fearful of losing complete control of his woman, collaborated with the settler government to strip the woman of almost every right she had enjoyed prior to colonialism. Jackson (2002) describes how various pressure groups such as the Matebele Home Society and the Matebele Patriotic Society implored the colonial authorities to put up restrictive policies, which would curtail the woman's mobility and sexuality. The settler government was happy to oblige as long as the request served their economic interests. They were keen to have the black man's labour in order to buttress their capitalist institutions. If it meant relegating the black woman to the margins of the society, so be it. The new

policies were further enhanced by the colonial government's codification of what they termed 'customary' law, which Deborah (2001) argues was a gross misrepresentation of the actual customs of the black people before colonialism. 'Customary' law condemned the black woman to the perpetual status of a minor, whose voice could only be mediated by either her husband or her male relatives.

Up until 1982, when the Legal Age of Majority Act was passed by the Zimbabwean government, women, no matter what their social standing, could not enter into contractual agreements or own property in their own right. Colonialism, thus, stripped the black woman of the dignified position she used to occupy in pre-colonial Africa. Dube says the pre-colonial black woman may not have perceived herself as a secondary citizen in her society, but now the colonial government turned her into a second class citizen, who had no rights of her own except those the settler government and her men folk condescended to give her. According to the Nigerian playwright Zulu Sofola (cited in Ukandike N. Frank, 1994:4-5), the colonial woman has been,

...most viciously attacked through the cosmology of the alien cultures of the European and Arab that has left her stripped bare of all that made her existence worthwhile in the traditional African system of sociopolitical order of governance.

It is with this background in mind that this chapter seeks to interrogate Makhalisa's vision of gender roles in Zimbabwe. It has to be appreciated that Makhalisa, herself, has suffered the indignities of being a colonial subject and worse still as a black woman. Hers is a 'nervous condition', a term used by Jean-Paul Sartre (1961) to describe the psyche of the colonized subject. Sartre argues that this condition is introduced and maintained by the settler with the colonized people's consent. However, as a novelist of acclaim in Zimbabwe, the question whether her discourse has transcended this imposition by the colonizer, begs to be answered. Chinua Achebe (1964) argues that an African writer cannot be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. The colonized person needs to regain his dignity by rising above the colonially constructed stereotypes. The question to ask now, is whether Makhalisa can claim to be one such writer, whose creative works help black women tear the heavy veil draped on black womanhood by the colonizer.

## **Reinforcing the stereotypes in *Qilindini***

*Qilindini* (1974), Makhala's first novel, is an interesting mystery story involving the killing of villagers' sheep by unknown persons. Reading the story leaves one in no doubt that the dominant ideological atmosphere is masculine. Throughout the novel, males occupy positions of power and authority. The women are relegated to the margins of the main action, where they act as mere observers of the situation. The weighty problems, such as the one currently plaguing the villagers, are handled exclusively by men. The public domain is the preserve of the male figure. The reactions of both men and women to the crime immediately drive home the fact that the narrator of the story perceives this 'reality' from a male perspective. Chapter three of the story shows the men discussing the crime with a view to coming up with a solution to the problem. The gathering is characterized by somberness and a business-like atmosphere, a far cry from the earlier high pitched and malicious laughter that characterized MaBhebhe and MaZondo's meeting. The chief's wives only feature in so far as they provide the beer that the men drink during their discussion. Man is thus being cast as the main actor and the determiner of the existence of the whole community.

In contrast, the first chapter of the narrative captures MaZondo and MaBhebhe gossiping about all and sundry in the village. The writer uses them to inform the reader about the criminal act of killing the sheep and yet, in no way indicates that these two are potential problem solvers. The women have been conditioned into believing that decision-making is a male activity. All they can do is lambaste Chief Sibindi for his inability to handle the issue. They do not have the mandate to express their feelings in a public domain, so they resort to the private .What is of interest is that the narrator characterizes this talk as gossip, a kind of talk looked down upon as aimless and very often malicious. At one stage in the course of their talk, the women are startled by a movement in the bushes and are terrified that someone might have heard them:

"E...e...e, ngubani ke lowo ozasifica sinyeya sihlobo?" kunyenyeza uMaZondo esethuka, amehlo akhe agcwala indawana yonke (85).

"E...e...e, who is this my friend, who will find us gossiping?" whispered MaZondo. She was terrified and her eyes were roaming all over the place looking for the intruder.

The depiction of the women as idle gossips is further reinforced when news of the killing of the chief's two sheep is reported to Zikhali and his wife MaBhebhe. Whilst Zikhali and other men rush to the scene of the crime, MaBhebhe makes for MaZondo's home to regale her of the latest developments. The narrator captures this encounter thus:

Singeke sakulandisa okwaxoxwa nguMaBhebhe lo MaZondo sikuqede. Kodwa uhleko lwazwakala kokuphela. Babebhulana imphlane, bexhawulana ingani izandla zingaze zithi tshuphu! Kuthi lapho emnandi khona kakhulu indaba, indlebe yomunye isondezwe kunyenyezwe kuzwakale uhleko kuphela luqhuqhumba emaphaneni ingani zimpisi zithabele amathe esilwane (46).

We cannot fully describe the conversation between MaBhebhe and MaZondo. However, there was continuous laughter between the two. They were slapping each other's backs and shaking hands so much that one would have thought their hands would come off. When the news item was considered to be too confidential, it would be whispered into the other's ear. This would be followed by gales of high pitched laughter similar to the sounds of hyenas while waiting for the left-overs of a lion's meal.

The picture of two grown women frolicking like little girls is very reductive and underlines their inferior status in the society. The narrator perpetuates the myth of women as minors who are incapable of contributing meaningfully to the serious business of identifying the criminal. The two women are living true to the roles earmarked for them by the settler government. The 'customary' law crafted by the colonial authorities placed the woman in the position of a minor, wholly dependent on her husband. Makhalisa has simply created two women who fit into the mould designed for them by the colonizer. No attempt is made by the writer to rise above the colonial constructions of the black woman. This is further underlined at the end of the novel when MaBhebhe is taken back by her people because Zikhali, her husband, has been arrested and is no longer there to take care of her. This whole act suggests that, like a child, she is incapable of making a life for herself and her family. Yet, in the absence of their husbands, these women run their homesteads and ensure that the livestock is

taken care of. MaZondo alludes to this fact at the beginning of the novel, but Makhala does not explore this part of the woman's life.

The writer seems to be conforming to the Victorian and colonial notion that a 'good' woman neither invades the masculine space, nor attempts to play an active role in the decision-making process. Elizabeth Schmidt says that in colonial Rhodesia, women who refused to conform to the laws regulating the woman's voice, mobility and sexuality, were very often considered undesirables in society. Women who had access to cash ('good' women stayed at home and did not participate in the cash economy) were presumed to have obtained it through 'immoral' means such as prostitution and beer brewing (Elizabeth Schmidt, 1992:103). All this was done to curb the woman's potential to assume meaningful positions in society. By reinforcing the stereotypes of the women as passive and childlike, the writer is undermining their dignity, as well as their ability to take up positions of power and authority in the community. She has constructed female characters who are content with maintaining the status quo, women who, consciously or unconsciously, have submitted themselves to the power of both the colonial and the male gaze. This, according to, Zulu Sofola (cited in Ukandike, N. Frank 1994:1) is the 'de-womanization of African womanhood'. The pre-colonial African woman was neither a minor nor a dependent of her man. By not interrogating this colonial construction of the black woman, Makhala is simply re-affirming the stereotypes.

Besides, Makhala's female characters seem to have no ambition beyond the domestic sphere. Whilst it is outside the mandate of this chapter to debate the pros and cons of the institution of marriage, it is nonetheless interesting to note that Makhala's female characters seem to be fixated on it. From the beginning, MaBhebhe makes it known that one of her greatest wishes is to see her niece, Thenjiwe, marry Sibindi, the village chief. She puts pressure on Thenjiwe to accept Sibindi's proposal even though she is fully aware that Thenjiwe loathes him. What is even more surprising is that MaBhebhe, herself, is very contemptuous of Sibindi whom he believes to be a poor administrator of the village affairs and also no match for his late father. Yet, she is not averse to her niece marrying the man and her reason is that this marriage will be materially advantageous to both herself and Thenjiwe. Makhala seems, therefore, to be muting the idea that women are economic dependents of men and that they could go to any lengths to get a man who can provide.

Thenjiwe, herself, is preoccupied with marrying Mnyasa. Every time she features in the narrative, her thoughts and actions are centered on her

relationship with Mnyasa and her fear of being forced to marry Sibindi whom she loathes. Surprisingly though, when she thinks Mnyasa is gone for ever, she surrenders to her aunt's pressure to accept Sibindi's proposal. Nowhere in the narrative do we see her aspiring for economic independence. The picture of the woman emerging here is one of helplessness and total dependence on men, an image not supported by the historical accounts given of the pre-colonial African woman. These women seem to be content to remain in the rural environment, whilst their husbands go to the urban centers to work. However, Teresa Barnes (2002) says that, whilst the colonial authorities and the black man did everything they could to curtail the woman's mobility, this was not always successful. The African woman was used to being active in the economy of her society, and as a result, many migrated into the towns to look for employment. Barnes describes this tendency by writers to constantly position the woman in the rural space as trapping her semantically in a world where she makes no choices and is rooted to the earth (Barnes, *ibid.*). She describes this literary distortion as the 'rural widow' syndrome, implying that it was not exactly true that black women had no ambition beyond the rural space. One is, therefore, left with no choice but to conclude that Makhala's depiction of women is mostly informed by the colonial authority's construction of black womanhood.

It has to be noted that whilst marriage was a very important institution amongst the Ndebele, it was not the only avenue that women pursued for self-definition. Historically, Ndebele women were active participants in their societies both economically and politically. Marieke Clarke's presentation at the Britain Zimbabwe Society Research Days, June 12 and 13, 2004, shows that Ndebele queens were women of power, both economically and politically. They were cattle owners as well as important players in the military well-being of the Ndebele state. The annual *Inxwala* festival, which was the most important event in the Ndebele calendar, was led by senior Ndebele women such as Lobhengula's senior wife, Lozikeyi. According to Clarke, Lozikeyi became such a powerful symbol of resistance that even the ZIPRA guerrillas, led by the late nationalist Joshua Nkomo, laid bullets on her grave during the liberation war.

All this is evidence that the pre-colonial Ndebele woman was a force to reckon with in the affairs of the nation. Yet, Makhala gives us a picture of a woman who is so thoroughly domesticated that she has been rendered voiceless. One can, therefore, argue that Makhala's depiction of the woman as a dependent, with absolutely no ambition beyond the domestic space, is informed by the colonial authorities' discourse of a woman as a minor. The

settler government, through numerous legislations, attempted to completely domesticate the Ndebele woman. She was not expected to envisage herself as an active player in the economy of her society. The ‘customary’ law codified by the British, and supported by the black men, almost made it criminal for a woman to be single in colonial Rhodesia. Lawrence Vambe (in Barnes, 1999:66) says, ‘Anybody who was not married...she was considered a prostitute’. Unmarried women were prohibited by law from entering urban compounds because they were viewed as disruptive influences and carriers of venereal diseases. The Keeper of Life Society in Railway Block, Selukwe, petitioned the colonial government to force unmarried women not to enter the compounds unless they showed a willingness to marry (Jackson, 2002). Marriage during the colonial era assumed a new meaning. It became a means to control the woman’s voice, mobility and sexuality. Makhala’s silencing of the woman’s voice smacks of a new way of thinking imposed on black people by colonialism. She does not see the woman beyond the colonial bounds set for her by the colonial authorities in collaboration with black man. Makhala’s gaze is, therefore, both colonial and masculine as she sees the woman through these collaborating patriarchal systems.

### **Struggling to break free of the gaze in *Umendo***

In Makhala’s second novel, *Umendo* (1977), there is a slight shift away from the rigid gaze of the patriarchal colonial authority and male gaze of *Qilindini*. The women are more complex than those of the first novel. They are more ambitious and more determined to carve a niche for themselves in this masculine world of colonial Rhodesia. Gugu’s friend, Musa, for example, has a thriving career in nursing and marriage is not high on her agenda. Unlike Thenjiwe in *Qilindini*, she is prepared to pursue other avenues, which are not necessarily tied up with marriage. Gugu also shakes off the badge of victimhood, leaves her abusive husband to look for a job so as to fend for herself and her daughter. These women are not conforming completely to the colonial stereotype of women as economic dependants of men.

However, despite their personal advancement, the two women remain firmly under the control of the masculine gaze. Musa, who looked set to become single all her life eventually makes up her mind to marry Joji. It can also be argued that Gugu never for once in her life frees herself from the male gaze. Whatever success she achieves, it is in full view of the men in her life. Her definition of self is within the bounds of the male gaze. Three men take turns to

keep her under control, namely, her father, her husband, Ndaba and Thulani, the man she later marries. As a child and a single woman, the onus was on her father to keep her under surveillance. When Ndaba paid *lobola*, the father relinquished his right to continue controlling her. This becomes apparent when he refuses to give Gugu and her children shelter because, in his view, he has no mandate to do so. He says to Gugu's mother:

[K]abuyele khonale lapho alayelwe khona ngumkakhe. Emkhutsheni wakithi ilizwi lendoda aliphikiswa ngumuntu wesifazana. Mina angisoze ngiziphosele endabenengingayaziyo ngingakaboni umuntu othunywe ngabakoMpfu ngoba amacala angiwafuni (51).

[S]he should go back to where she was told to go by her husband. In our culture, a man's word is never challenged by a woman. I will not interfere in matters which do not concern me. I will only entertain her problems if her husband sends a messenger to explain the situation. For now, I do not want to be accused of any wrong doing.

The only way her father can reclaim his right to take charge of his daughter's life again, is if Gugu's husband follows the right channels of handing her over, in this case, by sending a go-between to her father to announce that he is no longer interested in his child. When this rite has been observed, the right to control Gugu will pass back to her father. The second man in Gugu's life to claim the right to control her is her husband, Ndaba. Ndaba, however, abuses his rights and neglects Gugu and the children. He instructs Gugu to stay in his rural home until he sends for her. When she cannot take the suffering anymore, she defies her husband's orders and goes to the city to join him. Ndaba is infuriated by this act and shouts at her:

Ngubani othe uze lapha wena ? Hi? Phendula ngingakakudukluzi nje amazinyo lawo akhumuke...Abakini abakulayanga ukuthi kufanele umelele izwi elivela kumkakho kuqala kuso sonke isikhathi na?"(39).

Who told you to come here? Hi? Answer me before I knock off your teeth... Didn't your people tell you that you should wait for your husband's instructions all the time?

Ndaba wants all the full powers of the masculine gaze, but does not want the responsibility that goes with it. As a result, Gugu defies his control over her.

On seeing that she is trapped under Ndaba's uncompromising and cruel gaze, Gugu 'frees' herself by running away to her friend Musa in Gweru. When she discovers that Musa has been transferred to Kadoma, she turns to Thulani for help. Thulani, therefore, takes over from where Ndaba left and provides Gugu with shelter. He also buys her new clothes, and gets her a job. Even when she later seeks her independence by insisting that she moves out of Thulani's house, it is Thulani who finds the house for her and even furnishes it. The narrative seems to insist on making only a man help Gugu, not a woman. One gets the feeling that Makhala deliberately engineers the situation by taking Musa out of the picture, thus leaving the way open for Thulani to take over Gugu's life. She and the other women are not given a chance to prove what they are capable of as women. The writer does not explore the potential sisterhood that might have developed between Musa and Gugu. What is apparent, therefore, is that Gugu has exchanged one male gaze for another, albeit a much more humane one. Even Nodumo, Thulani's sister comes back to her brother when she loses her husband in a road accident. The healing process takes place under the loving care of her brother. When she finally leaves, it is with the knowledge that another man will take over her protection. The message coming out loud and clear from the narrative, is that a woman's upward social mobility is only possible if a man is overseeing it. The women in the narrative can only derive their identity from the males. They are always bound by man's definition of them and are not given an opportunity to determine the direction they want their lives to take. Once again Makhala fails to transcend the masculine colonial discourse which marginalized the woman and made her dependent on men. By not interrogating this discourse, she is firmly positioning the woman within the parameters set for them by the colonial authorities and the colonial black men.

Another way in which the masculine gaze seems to thrive in the novel is through the writer's insistence that despite the economic advancement enjoyed by these women, marriage should be the cream that ices the cake. Women who choose to remain single, like Jenny, are immediately classified as prostitutes, who are out to destroy the hard working and unsuspecting males. In the end, we are made to believe that Ndaba's eventual downfall was solely because of Jenny. (The Adam and Eve story replaying itself.) It is possible that with this in mind, the writer does not, for one moment, consider leaving either

Gugu or Musa as single and independent women. The two are what she considers ‘good’ women and, ‘good’ women marry.

The fact that Makhalisa only frees Gugu from a loveless marriage through Thulani’s death smacks of another patriarchal gaze, the Judeo-Christian one. The Judeo-Christian law stipulates that when two people marry, it is till death parts them. Through the narrative, Gugu seems to find the idea of divorce abhorrent. Even though she has a chance to be happy with Thulani, she clings to her loveless marriage. Our hearts sink with despair when an unkempt and destitute Ndaba traces her to Gweru and is accepted back by Gugu at the expense of her promising relationship with Thulani. Relief only comes to her when Ndaba dies soon after his arrival, under conditions that once again smell of the writer’s interference in the narrative. It is only when Ndaba dies that Gugu accepts Thulani’s proposal. At no time in the narrative does the writer entertain a possibility of Gugu remaining single. When one man leaves her, another takes over.

### **De-centering the masculine gaze?**

In her short stories which are part of a collection, *Vus'Inkophe* (1996), published by the Zimbabwe Women Writers, Makhalisa’s female characters are a notch ahead of the women in the earlier novels. The women are much more forceful and determined to be actors in the society. Even the title of the anthology, which means ‘open your eyes wide’ or ‘wake up’ calls for a woman who is a fighter and is determined to stand up against all forms of exploitation directed at her by her men folk. The short stories were written in an environment where women’s rights had taken centre stage, not only internationally, but nationally as well. Zimbabwe’s independence in 1980 had thrust the issue of women’s rights to the forefront. Notwithstanding the complexities and contradictions dogging the attempt to improve women’s conditions in Zimbabwe, the government has done a lot to liberate the woman from the stifling position that she had been placed in by the colonial regime. Zimbabwean women had fought alongside the men to dismantle the settler government’s stranglehold on black people. The government was, thus, acknowledging this significant contribution by giving women more of a voice in matters of governance. Several laws, namely, the Legal Age of Majority Act (1982), the Maintenance Amendment Act (1997) and Administration of Estates Amendment Act (1997) were passed to facilitate women’s involvement in socio-economic and political issues. Because of these laws, a new woman, unlike the one created by the colonial regime, emerged in

Zimbabwe. Makhalisa's short stories are her own attempt to create this new woman.

Where before Makhalisa seemed to be in agreement with the colonial authorities on the undesirability of single women in the colony, now she is challenging the discourse, aligning herself with current Zimbabwean discourses on gender. Being single and independent no longer appears to be a status causing a lot of anxiety amongst the women. The single women in these stories seem to have many other options to explore in life other than marriage. In the story 'Ngeke' (I will not), the young narrator makes it clear that her main ambition is to get an education which will raise her above her poverty. Despite the many temptations coming her way, she refuses to make men the centre of her universe. Her declaration:

Kodwa okusemqoka, ngizithanda kakhulu mina ngokwami. Angifuni ukuzidanisa. Ngizabhensa ngisadalale. Angisoze ngivinjelwe yimigoqo le ehele endleleni yami. Ngeke!(165).

First and foremost I love myself and would not like to disappoint myself. I will struggle and work hard. I will not be prevented from success by the numerous temptations put before me.)

This is the voice of a new kind of woman who has taken matters into her hands in order to shape her own destiny. Her statement that above all else she values herself more and that she will not disappoint herself by not fulfilling her dreams, is indicative of this new woman's attempt to displace man as the centre of her universe. Unlike Thenjiwe in *Qilindini*, who sees marriage as the only way to self-definition, the narrator makes it clear that there are many avenues open to her in her quest for self-hood. However, unlike radical feminists such as Shulamith Firestone (1970) and Vivian Gornick (1993) who call for the complete dismantling of patriarchy and its support structures, Makhalisa presents us with a situation where men and women's roles complement each other. The young narrator's dream of getting an education is made possible by her father, who defies the advice of his fellow villagers, to send his daughter to an urban school with better facilities than those of the rural school she first attended. Makhalisa rejects the idea of creating a lonesome figure of a woman fighting against all odds without the assistance of men. The stance she takes recalls Tsitsi Dangarembga's female characters in *Nervous Conditions* (1988) who in

the end of the narrative work side by side their men. Maiguru returns to Babamkuru with the understanding that they will now complement each other in their roles. Lucia, despite her disgust at Babamkuru's dictatorial tendencies, still comes to him for assistance to get a job. Tambudzai also acknowledges the role Babamkuru has played in educating her. Nyasha who, like the radical feminists, defies the patriarchy completely, ends up having a nervous break down. Both writers seem to be saying that black men and black women should complement each other in their roles just as the pre-colonial African societies did.

In these stories, Makhalisa also charts a new and important role for women. Whereas in the earlier novels the word of their men is final (as Gugu's father points out to his wife), now women can actively participate in the decision-making process both in their personal lives and in the communities they live in. MaNcube in 'Indoda yindoda' (Man will always be man) refuses to meekly take her husband's traditional definition of what a man should be. According to the husband, a man does not account for his actions to his wife. A 'good' wife accepts without protest her husband's instructions and activities. In his case, he comes home late almost every night and does not tell his wife in advance that he will be late or where he is going. MaNcube reverses roles by also disappearing for almost two days from home without telling her husband, in order to make him experience what she always goes through. She puts her husband in a position where he is forced to redefine his concept of manhood and re-imagine both their roles in the marriage institution. Similarly, NakaSipane, the wife of the man who marries the foreign woman in 'Impethundini' (The grub) also proves that unlike the earlier women who looked to their husbands to make all the decisions, she is capable of contributing meaningfully to her marriage. She advises that the man involved (she is not aware that it is her husband) should own up to his wrongs because a guilty conscience can be a yolk around a person's neck for life. It is also worth noting that the husband actively seeks his wife's advice, a new development in the woman/man relations as portrayed in literature. In 'Kayisimandlwane' (This is not child's play), it is also the woman who is at the forefront in advising her husband to send the children to nursery school. The women, unlike those in the first novel, *Qilindini*, are now actively involved in the decision-making processes of their families and societies. They are now challenging any attempts by men to treat them like doormats. Makhalisa also seems to stress the non-violent and non-confrontational tactics used by these women to bring their husbands to their

way of thinking as if to say the way out for women should be negotiated carefully with their men.

The story which, however, foregrounds Makhala's belief that power and authority ultimately lie with the masculine is 'Isudu yebhulugwe' (A suit). Bahle has, since childhood, been denied the right to wear trousers by her father. At one time she is severely thrashed and her mother verbally assaulted for allowing her to wear a pair of shorts which was required for sporting activities at school. On one level, the story is merely about a father making his preferences of what his daughter should wear. On another level, a much more symbolic one, the struggle between father and daughter is a struggle for control and power – that is, who should wear the 'pants' in the house. The trousers are traditionally a symbol of masculinity. The father's insistence that he alone wears the trousers could be symbolic of his fear of losing his masculinity to the women folk in his home. When Bahle sees her father having lunch with a woman (presumably his mistress) wearing trousers, she is furious that he has given her (the mistress) the power that she has been denied. She makes up her mind to go home wearing a suit made up of a pair of trousers and a jacket. To confront her father, she decides to assume a masculine stance, which is being symbolized by her attire. What is ironic, however, is that by wearing the suit, she is indirectly acknowledging that 'real' power is vested in the masculine, for why else does she not confront him in her usual feminine dress? One is reminded of Wariinga in Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* (1982), whose empowerment is accompanied by the loss of all those attributes that signify femininity. Ngugi turns her into a motor mechanic, a job she proves to be better at than her male colleagues. She also becomes a martial arts expert as well as an expert shot. At the end of the novel, she is seen shooting those men who had exploited her in the past. The gun is a phallic symbol of power and her ability to use it to control her exploiters, places her in the realm of the masculine. Both Makhala and Ngugi, therefore, seem to subscribe to the belief that to be powerful, one needs to acquire masculine traits.

## Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, I would say Makhala's gaze is predominantly masculine. Three different types of patriarchy, the colonial, traditional and the Judeo-Christian basically influence her work. As Schmidt (1992) argues, these

gazes converged to become one powerful force that successfully pushed the woman to the margins of society. Makhalisa's first two books seem to accept this marginalization without question. It is even more so in the first book where the woman is turned into a 'passive rural widow', waiting for her men folk to provide. The writer, herself a colonial subject, fails to transcend the limitations of the colonial discourse. In her short stories, however, Makhalisa, like many black women writers of the latter half of the twentieth century, tries to break free of the stereotypes imposed on black women by colonial regimes. In charting a way forward, Makhalisa, rejects the way of the radical feminists and opts for a situation where black men and their women work together not as antagonists but as partners. In this, it can be argued that she is revisiting the pre-colonial gender roles where black men and black women's roles complemented each other. However, the story 'Isudu yebhulugwe' reveals that Makhalisa's conception of womanhood is still skewed in favour of men. Requiring women to be masculine so as to be taken seriously in their cry for recognition does not help the woman much. Even as she tries to liberate women, her gaze is strongly masculine.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Note that this is a term used extensively in film theory to refer to ways viewers, as well as the viewed look at images. Laura Mulvey says it is a look which is socially constructed and, therefore, determines the balance of power in society. It assigns meaning to the object that is being looked at. The world is seen through male eyes and women are conditioned to look at themselves the way men would look at them. As a result they have become the object of the male gaze. This phenomenon has made its presence felt not only in film but also in other forms of art which try to represent the human world.

(For further information on the discourse of the 'gaze' see Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Reading* (ed), Gerald Mast and Marshal Cohen, New York, Oxford University Press, 1985:803-816 ).

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**Zifikile Mguni**

### **Introduction**

The major concern of this chapter is to examine Ndebele women poets' perception of, and interpretation of the condition of women in Zimbabwe in the context of culture as portrayed in the first and only exclusively female-authored collection of Ndebele poems – *Inkondlo* (1998). Indigenous cultural traditions have often been blamed for not allowing women adequate space to be on the same level with their male counterparts socially, politically and economically. This chapter focuses on how Zimbabwean women, in their own voices, perceive their condition and also what they perceive as the role of indigenous cultures in either oppressing or empowering them. The chapter also examines the strategies or tools that women themselves put forward as a means of advancing their empowerment. It is hoped that this discussion will not only reveal the social vision of Zimbabwe's women writers in indigenous languages, but also bring women's writings in African languages to the centre of Zimbabwe's literary activity, which has been dominated by men since its inception fifty years ago. The larger goal is to contribute towards dialogue whose aim is to promote women's empowerment.

### **Theoretical framework**

African women critics in Africa and the Diaspora have foregrounded the role that African cultures should play in liberating women. They argue that the condition of the African woman can only be fully appreciated within the context of African culture, and that genuine liberation of African women can also only take place in the same context. Commenting on the importance of culture in addressing African issues, Clenora Hudson Weems (in Obioma Nnaemeka, 1998:155) explains that her Africana Womanism theory 'is grounded in *African* culture and, therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women'. Weems goes on to explain that unlike mainstream feminists, the Africana woman 'does not see the man as her primary enemy' as men 'have never had the same institutionalized power to oppress Africana women' in African communities (*ibid*). Africana women and men who embrace the feminist movement, asserts Weems (*ibid*), 'have no

true commitment to their culture and their people'. Unlike mainstream feminists who foster individualism, Africans are 'grassroots people who depend on the support and confidence of their communities,' and therefore the community to them, rather than gender issues, is of utmost importance. (*ibid*). She further asserts that, 'while Africana women do, in fact, have some legitimate concerns regarding African men, these concerns must be addressed within the context of 'African culture' rather than 'an alien framework' like feminism (*ibid*:157). Hence, the varied problems of African women, emanating from within and outside the African race, 'have to be solved on a collective basis *within Africana communities*' (*ibid*). This entails both men and women joining hands to work together for the common good in the context of their cultures. The importance of communalism, a significant aspect of African culture, is also emphasized by the Nigerian writer-critic, Zulu Sofola (*ibid*:54):

The worldview of the African is rooted in a philosophy of holistic harmony and communalism rather than in the individualistic isolationism characteristic of European thought...If one is cut off from his community, one is considered dead (Ehusani, 1991:92). The individual belongs primarily to a context, and within it he/she moves and has his/her being.

This approach foregrounds women in the context of family and community, that is, the collective as opposed to the individual (Strong-Leek, in Chiwome et al, 2000:201). In support of this view, the Zimbabwean writer, Tsitsi Dangarembga (in Carol Boyce-Davies, 1995:29) argues that good female writing should go beyond looking at the problems of the individual woman or women as a group and realize that problems facing women have their roots in the problems of a society. This entails understanding a particular society and its culture, since men and women operate in the context of their cultures, which determine their relationships.

### **Women's perception of the condition of the Zimbabwean women in *Inkondlo***

Prior to the publication of *Inkondlo* by Zimbabwe Women Writers, female voices in poetry had been scattered in a number of anthologies, quite often muffled by their male counterparts. *Inkondlo* focuses on a wide range of themes, some of which are recycled colonial stereotypes. However, as has already been mentioned, what distinguishes this anthology from what has so far been

published is that it is one of the first exclusively female-authored collection of poems in indigenous languages in Zimbabwe, and that quite a sizeable percentage of poems focus on a relatively new theme in literature – women and empowerment – social, political and economic. This marks a new focus in terms of creative writing – women have begun writing about themselves, and presumably for themselves as well as for their society.

As already indicated, *Inkondlo* focuses on a wide variety of themes ranging from the war of liberation, traditional food, poverty, AIDS and the condition of women in Zimbabwean society, and some recycled themes such as nature, love and death. The primary concern of this chapter is to focus on a representative sample of those poems that articulate the condition of women in society in the context of culture.

Barbara Makhalisa's 'Vus' inkophe' (Open your eyes), which reminisces a short story collection with the same title and published by the same publisher, is a wake-up call directed at women, urging them to wake up to the reality of their oppression and take up arms to fight for emancipation. Although Makhalisa does not explicitly state the source of this oppression, one can safely conclude that there is an allusion to African culture, as she urges women to adopt new ways of waging their struggles (*unyawo olutsha*), and not be left behind as the winds of change have begun to blow. One can also conclude that the winds of change referred to is primarily the presence of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) - the sponsors of the publication, as well as the much talked about government 'efforts' to uplift women's lives after independence (Elinor Batezat et al, in Colin Stoneman, 1988:153-173). Stanza 2 of the same poem urges the women to move from darkness to light, which could be taken as an indirect condemnation of Africa's pre-industrial societies. This image unfortunately aligns itself with western imperialistic notions of Africa as a dark continent into which Europeans brought light.

She urges women to be subjects, not objects of history, a reflection of the African woman's determination, potential and resilience. They themselves have to be agents of change. This is a new voice in indigenous languages literature, which instills virtues of self-confidence and self-worth on the part of women. The conviction that women will always rise to the occasion and prosper against all odds is also reflected in one of Makhalisa's poems entitled, 'Batsho ngani?' (Why do they say this?), which recounts women's invaluable contribution to Zimbabwe's struggle for political liberation.

In the poem under discussion, Makhalisa condemns laziness on the part of women and derogatively refers to such women as ‘*vilandini*’ and ‘*vilavixo*’ (extremely lazy person). This calls to mind a Ndebele traditional work song, where *ivilavovo* is derogatively used to refer to a lazy girl who is satirized for feigning illness in order to hide her failure to stamp corn to prepare the traditional dish *isitshwala*, for a much-valued brother-in-law who has come to visit. Although there is nothing wrong with urging women to work hard, the persona’s negative attitude against ‘lazy’ women who fail to fend for their families unfortunately decontextualizes the condition in which the generality of women in Zimbabwe find themselves. Researchers have long established that colonialism, with its attendant racist and gender-oppressive apparatus, distorted and disrupted African economies, histories and cultures, thus creating levels of poverty that had hitherto been unknown in African communities. Elinor Batezat et al (in Stoneman, *ibid*:155) observe that,

[Zimbabwean] women’s position was severely circumscribed by the codification of Customary Law, which applied to arears concerning marriage, the family and associated property relationships. A black woman was now also deemed a ‘minor’ for the whole of her life, under the perpetual ‘jurisdiction’ of a man.

They also question the authenticity of the ‘custom’ that governed the status of African women in the colonial period, and further quote May (*ibid*:155) who posits that:

[I]t seems certain that the models of that society constructed by white males are more revealing of the attitudes of their makers and their informants than they are of the position of women.

Makhalisa’s new strategy of waging women’s struggles is through the pen (*usiba*). The writer’s appeal is obviously directed at and limited to literate women who are urged to commit their ideas on paper for a literate audience; thereby urging women to move to the centre of Zimbabwe’s literary activity. She envisages a marked transformation of women’s lives, whom she refers to in Christian images as Eva’s descendants (*olukaEva usaphokazi*), an indicator of the writer’s ideology. She argues that it is women’s responsibility to use the

pen to instill wisdom, raise women's consciousness to the reality of their oppression, and abandon self-pity.

This argument is in line with the Zimbabwe Women Writers' objectives of promoting women's writing in Zimbabwe, developing women's writing skills, encouraging the reading of women's writing and promoting literacy among women (Norma Kitson, 1994:v). This has to be seen in the light of the agenda of the sponsors who include HIVOS, the British Council, and Alliance Francaise.

Although the argument that literate women do not submit to patriarchal expectations in the same way that their illiterate counterparts do cannot be supported empirically, Makhalisa embraces literacy as a weapon with which women can fight their oppression. This is based on the contentious assumption that political independence has seen a marked transformation from colonial to African centered education. Many African scholars and writers see colonial education as alienating African people.

Again, although it could be argued that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this strategy, however, in a third world country like Zimbabwe, this strategy leaves out the majority of women, as buying books is a luxury that they can ill-afford. The major market for books are teenagers in schools who would access literary ideas only if the book is prescribed for school use, as, in addition to lack of adequate money to buy books, there is a general lack of a reading culture in Zimbabwe. One is left with a feeling that a much more viable strategy than the one advocated by western sponsored NGOs needs to be evolved to effectively address the multi-faceted challenges faced by Zimbabwean women today. It is not clear from the poem how literacy on its own can successfully be used to positively transform women's lives.

Sukoluhle Ncube's 'Umazakhela' recounts the plight of divorced and single women who have reached marriageable age. Among the Ndebele, the term *umazakhela* is used satirically and derogatively to refer to such women. Traditionally, girls are socialized to believe that marriage is a significant and mandatory rite of passage. It enhances womanhood. However, in line with current challenges, which include the unprecedented economic decline and the problems that have been brought about by the HIV/AIDS pandemic that has wrecked havoc in Zimbabwe, the persona subverts this traditional thinking by speaking from the point of view of these disadvantaged women, and sympathizing with them. She recounts the effort they have to make to fend for themselves and their families. Sometimes they are forced to engage in socially unacceptable behavior, much to the chagrin of their neighbors. In the first

stanza, there is an insinuation that such women fend for their families by working as sex workers, hence they are sighted *ebhawa enkulu* (in the big beerhall). For some, this is not by choice (*Abanye kabazithandelanga*).

In a manner that reminisces Virginia Phiri's *Desperate* (2000), the persona argues that women are forced by circumstances beyond their control to engage in such behavior:

Bayakhala omazakhela  
Badinga okungabanceda  
Bafuna ukuba njengomuntu wonke  
Kalikho inina elikuthandayo lokhu  
Wonke umfazi ufunu ukuba lemuli (6).

Single women are crying  
They want to sustain themselves  
They desire to be like everybody else  
No woman enjoys this kind of life  
Every woman wants to have a family.

While lines 1-2 draw attention to the plight of the generality of Zimbabwe's single women, lines 3-4 demonstrate how socialization determines women's expectations and options. In line with the African worldview, the persona defines womanhood and selfhood in the context of marriage and the family. To the traditionally-minded, respect has to be earned, and this has to be done through marriage, which also serves as a means of providing emotional and material survival (Ncube and Stewart et al, 1997). This calls to mind the African brand of feminism, which includes, among other things, 'the centrality of children' (Filomena Steady, in Carole Boyce-Davies, 1986:36).

Stanza 3 highlights the vulnerability of such women as they are depicted as the targets of thieves and burglars, again a stance that unfortunately foregrounds women as helpless victims of circumstances in which they find themselves. In its attempt to define circumstances that have driven women to this lifestyle, the last stanza appears to contradict the writer's earlier stance. While such women are depicted as victims of social change, they are at the same time satirized for their make-up – lipstick and relaxed hair – which are often associated with western culture. There is even insinuation that some of them derive pleasure from such activities, a view that not only contradicts the

writer's earlier stance, but also stands in contradistinction to the multiplicity of voices of commercial sex workers captured in Virgina Phiri's *Desperate*. However, unlike previous voices in Zimbabwean literature by women writers (see Makhalisa, Mthethwa and Miilo), Ncube manages to link the condition of the modern day woman in Zimbabwe to society in general, that is, the problems brought about by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the comparatively high divorce rate, and the emergence of a class that does not attach much value to marriage - all of which have created an unprecedented number of single women in Zimbabwe. The writer, however, does not go beyond articulating problems to suggest solutions and strategies that could be used to confront the problems.

Ngoni Moyo's 'Igoli lolunya' (Johannesburg is mean spirited) alludes to the severe economic conditions that have driven Zimbabwean men of all ages and of different generations to the gold mines in the Rand in neighboring South Africa. It attempts to draw society's attention to the evils of the migrant labour system that has bedeviled the Zimbabwean society from the early days of colonialism to the present. Women are depicted as the worst victims of this system, as they are deprived of their traditional protectors and providers, as well as the services of the able-bodied members of the community. Stanza 2 is a desperate cry:

Pho eZimbabwe omama bayasala lobani?  
Bayagcinwa ngubani?  
Bayathuma bani?  
Bayalahlwa ngubani? (4).

Who in Zimbabwe are our mothers going to remain with?  
Who is going to look after them?  
Who are they going to send on errands?  
Who shall bury them?

This voice of dejection has overtones of helplessness and hopelessness, and this runs contrary to African women's potential, resourcefulness and resilience. As observed by Carole Boyce-Davies (1986:36),

True feminism is an abnegation of male protection and determination to be resourceful and reliant. The majority of black women in Africa

and the Diaspora have developed these characteristics, though not always by choice.

In line with this thinking, the Ghanaian-born writer and critic Ama Ata Aidoo (in Obioma Nnaemeka, 1998:41) observes that African women are descendants of ‘some of the bravest, most independent, and most innovative women this world has ever known’. She goes on to show how women of various parts of the African continent have, with various degrees of success and failure, resisted foreign invasion and also taken part in struggles for national independence. The persona’s voice in the poem under discussion then could only be a cry uttered by those women ‘whose psyche has been severely damaged in the process of acquiring Western education with its philosophy and gender bias’. These women have developed ‘an incurable dependence and inferiority complex...and rendered completely impotent in matters which her ‘illiterate, rural counterparts’ would have handled with ease and quick dispatch’ (Sofola, in *ibid*: 61).

Moyo’s solution to the problems she outlines is contained in stanza 4 which urges Zimbabwean citizens to abandon their search for an alternative existence and come back home. The persona appeals to Zimbabwe’s political leadership to give the men what they seek in Johannesburg. While the persona successfully links the unfavorable and deteriorating conditions of the African family to Zimbabwe’s ailing economy, she takes from both men and women the ability and potential to improve their own condition, and entrusts the leadership with the task of bringing about an economic turnaround. A mere appeal to the leadership is indeed a simplistic strategy of solving Africa’s economic ills. That simplistic thinking could explain why, in stanza 4, the writer adopts the style of a traditional children’s moonlight game, *Bantwana wozani ekhaya* (Children, please come home), to urge men to return home. Ama Ata Aidoo (*ibid*:42), rightly observes that the position of the African woman today has, among other things, been adversely affected by the ‘apparent lack of vision, or courage, in the leadership (including political elites) of the postcolonial period’.

The writer ends her poem on a sad note, as she recounts the plight of women whose sons and husbands are perpetually absent from home. This is reflected particularly in her diction. *Isililo*, which she uses to describe the women’s condition, likens the condition of women to a situation that prevails at a funeral, a reflection of the writer’s negative and defeatist attitude and feelings towards the women’s condition. This represents a complete destruction

of the potential of African women to wage their own struggles for self-empowerment. As already mentioned, this is unAfrican and runs contrary to African people's resilience and optimism. It also defines women in terms of the way they are affected or not affected by certain institutions and systems, for instance, being defined as victims of male violence, or victims of the colonial system, or as universal dependents (Mohanty, 2003). This stance assumes, contrary to reality, that individual women cannot gain power under patriarchy or under an oppressive political environment like the colonial system (Mohanty, ibid).

Doris Ndlovu's 'Ummumizana' is a celebration of wifehood. It subverts notions of male patriarchal authority by foregrounding women's indispensability in families and depicting men's total dependency on them. The term *umnumizana* refers to a man of standing in Ndebele society. Traditionally, he derived his status from his wealth, which was largely reckoned in the form of cattle and the size of his family. The more children a man had, then the bigger and stronger his source of labour, which was in turn used to generate more wealth. Ndlovu's poem is a reminder to such men that they owe their status to their wives. The first stanza demonstrates how men owe even the title *umnumizana* to their wives since single men, derogatively referred to as *ophekeyakhe* in the last stanza, could not be accorded that status. The term *uphekeyakhe*, which literally means 'the one who cooks his own food', is used by the Ndebele people to satirize and deride single men of marriageable age. In fact, the persona wittingly or unwittingly foregrounds the interdependence of men and women, and the fact that in African societies, labour was to a very large extent, gender-differentiated. Food preparation was, and is still largely considered a woman's domain. Citing Beach and May in order to explain the oft-misconceived gender relations in pre-colonial Zimbabwe, Elinor Batezat et al (in Colin Stoneman, 1988:154) explicate:

In these pre-colonial societies, all members were inextricably bound together in systems of mutual and life support. Despite her gender-subordinate position in the extended family, a woman had her own set of skills and responsibilities which commanded respect and protection, and on occasions this led to women being outstanding in their own right.

It is from these traditional roles and responsibilities that the persona derives her status as she asserts:

Ngingakafiki mina

.....  
Wawungabekelwa mganu

Wawuphiwa nxa ukhona

Ngafika mina wabekelwa (54).

Before I was part of this family

.....  
No meal was reserved for you

Food was served to you only when you were present

When I arrived, meals were reserved for you in your absence

As tradition dictates, African women do not normally view food preparation as pure drudgery, but as a source of pride and respect. So is child bearing, as indicated in stanza 3. As observed by Elinor Betezat et al (*ibid*:154):

Generally, women in indigenous societies of Zimbabwe were valued for their child bearing and nurturing capacities, for their skills in agriculture and rearing of livestock; and for their abilities to provide daily family needs...A woman's labour contributed much to the productive capacities of the society in which she lived...

Throughout the poem, the persona asserts that while the man is referred to as *umnumzana*, the woman is *umninimuzi* (the owner of the home). This is a direct subversion of male authority and supremacy as, among the Ndebele, the term *umninimuzi* is specifically used to refer to the man of the homestead, the traditional head of the family. Ndlovu's use of the term reflects the woman's varied and valued responsibilities towards the welfare of the family. For instance, as shown in stanza 8, when the persona goes visiting, her husband tells visitors to the homestead that '*Akulabantu*' (There is no one here), although he is present. What he actually means is that in the absence of his wife, there is no one to match her hospitality, generosity and the varied roles and responsibilities that are associated with wifehood, motherhood and womanhood in the African society. This also strengthens Betezat's observation about the interdependence

and complementarity of men's and women's roles in traditional African communities. The same sentiment is also echoed by Meddie Sibanda in 'Ngubani owayesazi?' (Who could have guessed?). Sibanda's last line foregrounds the fact that in African societies, men and women are 'inextricably bound together':

Kanti ubaba lomama ngu 6 lo 9 (22).

Father and mother are like 6 and 9.

Moved close to each other, the figures 6 and 9 fit perfectly like a jigsaw puzzle, thus emphasizing the fact that in Africa, men and women are inseparable and complement one another in every respect.

In a three-page poem entitled 'Umfelokazi' (The widow), Duduzile Nomatshazi Mlandeli condemns the manner in which a widow is customarily expected to express grief over her husband's death. While ritual friends, as per Shona custom in particular, crack jokes to divert the mourners' attention from the tragedy that has struck the family, the widow, according to Mlandeli, is not expected to derive any sense of relief from this custom. She only raises her head to acknowledge the arrival of relatives as she joins them to wail the death of her husband. She is not expected to stand up, talk or sleep (*Akasukumi, akaxoxi, akalali*) (38). She is not even allowed to take a bath in the hot weather. As per custom, she has covered her head and face with a blanket as an expression of grief and also to make herself easily identifiable. However, the writer interprets this custom as society's way of inflicting further punishment on the grieving widow. She does not, however, indicate why society would desire to inflict punishment on its womenfolk. The writer may be understood to be foregrounding the alleged barbaric or sadistic nature of African societies. This attitude calls to mind Europeans' ways of interpreting African customs whose philosophy Europeans did not in any way understand.

In stanza 6, the writer alleges that even after the burial, the widow cannot seek solace elsewhere as she is expected to wait for those who may still come to express their condolences. The writer also condemns the year-long grieving period, during which the widow is expected to put on attire that makes her easily identifiable. She sees this as inflicting double punishment on the widow as this kind of attire serves as a constant reminder of her loss. She sees this custom as geared towards *ukuhawulisa isidalwa seNkosi* (inflicting

suffering on God's creation), as the last stanza asserts. The statement is couched in religious terms in order to reinforce the evil nature of this custom. In a series of rhetorical questions, the writer strongly condemns the now widely accepted custom of wearing black clothes as a symbol of grief, which could be understood as the writer's disapproval of the custom of making the widow easily identifiable.

Traditionally, before the introduction of cloth among the Ndebele, a widow would tie a strip cut from the deceased husband's *ibhetshu* (loin-leather-apron) around her head, or wear her leather skirt inside out as a mark of mourning. To make widows easily identifiable in this manner used to serve a number of purposes. Firstly, it drew society's attention towards its vulnerable members, thereby directing all necessary forms of assistance and support towards them. Secondly, as such individuals were easily identifiable, it was society's way of ensuring that they received the respect that they deserved. Thirdly, it was a way of showing respect for the deceased head of the family who was now the immediate ancestor in the spiritual realm. A year after his death, a ceremony to 'bring back his spirit home' to protect his family (*umbuyiso*), would be performed after which there was no need for the widow to wear the identity mark. Black attire was adopted from European custom, a fact that the writer, like most African writers, seems ignorant of. Like Barbara Makhala's 'Fight on' (in Norma Kriger, 1994:72-74) which is a condemnation of African culture for oppressing women by, among other things, denying them the opportunity to attend school and ill-treating barren women, Mlandeli embraces the European practice of misinterpreting, distorting and even perceiving African women's condition out of the context of the history that either gave rise to, or reinforced women's marginalization. Commenting on the importance of contextualizing African women's problems, Ama Ata Aidoo (in Obioma Nnaemeka, 1998:47). writes:

Some of us are convinced of something else: that much of the putting down of women that educated African men indulge in and regard as "African culture" is a warmed-up left-over from colonization. European colonizing men (especially Victorians) brought with them a burden of confusion; first about their own women, and about other women – all of which was further muddled up by the colonizers' fantasies about the sexual prowess of both African men and women.

Like most African writers in indigenous languages, Mlandeli seems to condemn the material signification of culture, without appreciating the philosophy of life that gave rise to it. This unfortunately resonates with imperialistic ways of perceiving gender relations in Africa. It reinforces the widely accepted notion in the West that African societies are barbaric and oppress their womenfolk, an opinion that the writer alludes to in stanza 8 of her poem:

Aluba bekuhambe umama kuqala

Kambe ngabe umnyama ngalindlela ubaba na? (39)

If the dead person had been mother

Would father be in such desolation?

Such a stance is an aberration of true African womanhood. It resonates with Euro-American discourse on feminism, yet women the world over, are engaged in struggles for self-empowerment. It spells out relationships between African men and women that are framed on the basis of foreign, and quite often, inaccurate interpretations of the African culture.

The end of the poem is an admission by the poet of her powerlessness to change the state of affairs:

Aluba ngilamandla lamuhla bengizasidabudabula  
Lesi sembatho esibuhlungu kangaka (40).

If I had power I would shred this dress  
Which has brought so much pain.

Again, the negative images of black women where they are portrayed as helpless victims of their culture, are a misrepresentation of the reality of the condition of African women as it takes from them the potential to redefine and re-assert themselves. The writer's thinking is also contrary to womanists like Maria W. Stuart (in Collins, 1990) who challenges African American women to reject the negative images of Black womanhood, arguing that racial and sexual oppression were the fundamental cause of Black women's poverty. Also, the writer seems to have embraced what bell hooks (1995:62) terms the 'narrow perspective', that is, narrow notions of feminism that focus on the idea of woman as victim,

and man as oppressor or enemy. This is contrary to revolutionary feminist thinking, whose major concern is understanding ‘how sexism and sexist oppression are perpetuated and maintained by us all, not just men’. hooks goes on to acknowledge that ‘male domination continues to be a serious problem’, but reminds us that ‘it can never be the sole focus of feminist movement’.

## Conclusion

While a radical break in terms of deeply analyzing the condition of African women by women comes in literature written in English through the works of such writers as Vera, Nyamubaya and Dangarembga, *Inkondlo* to some extent can be credited with this achievement in African languages. *Inkondlo* bears testimony to Ndebele women writers’ active participation and agency in directing their society’s perceptions about African womanhood. To this end, their writings can be regarded as activism in the manner in which they contribute to the debate on the role and status of the contemporary African woman.

However, some writers seem to undermine African institutions without offering viable solutions to the very problems that African women face. What appears to be lacking is a genuine exploration of the African cultures. Women oppression and liberation take place in the context of culture, and a genuine examination of African cultures to determine the specific ways in which they oppress and liberate women can go a long way in positively transforming the lives of women. This is the issue that Zimbabwean women writers need to pursue in order to make a positive impact on the lives of the generality of women.

There is need for women writers to move away from stereotyping African women and men. Women’s creative efforts need to move to the centre by boldly articulating the concerns of a broad spectrum of women, from the point of view of women, with a view to positively transform their condition, as well as that of the family at large. In most of the colonial and neo-colonial literature in indigenous languages, African men and customs are made to be the cause of social and economic problems faced by women. This is done without giving a broad and insightful picture of the nature of colonialism and neo-colonialism and their impact on the lives of Africans in general and women in particular. In order to identify the source of women’s marginalization and avoid misrepresentations, distortions and exaggerations by writers, as is commonly the case, women writers should explore women’s issues in the context

of African history and culture. This entails going into real life and studying it, so that both creative efforts and scholarship do not distance themselves from real life. If we consider the question of gender relations, women writers need to conduct research into the cultural context in which the literature or art that creates attitudes towards women arises.

The emphasis here is that if creative writers do not give a correct and informed interpretation of African culture and also trace the problem of women's marginalization to its true source, then women's attempts to positively transform their lives will not yield the desired results, as they will be diagnosing the wrong disease and therefore giving the wrong prescription to their problems. As members of the educated elite, women writers should reflect the varied concerns of the generality of women, with a view to changing their lives for the better, that is, they should be wary of the danger of arguing for their own limited spaces. The coming together of African men and women to forge a collective struggle for survival and human dignity, using their own tools, is a significant step towards harmony and development.

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### Ruby Magosvongwe

The chapter is an appreciation of *Masimba* (2004), a Shona anthology of short stories written by indigenous Zimbabwean women. The chapter argues that Shona women writers utilize their knowledge of the traditional knowledge systems on communication and conflict resolution mechanisms at family level to frame their discourse on women's struggles towards humanizing the family institution. At the core of their interrogation is the cohesion and continuity of the family as an institution. Whilst the reading of individual stories may show the women writers' concerns at the problems of equality, individual liberation and women's rights in the face of modernity and struggles for freedom, their ultimate vision of retaining family cohesion derives from the values and principles that are deeply rooted in their conception and perception of Shona culture.

The chapter suggests that the female writers of *Masimba* insist on retaining the discursive Shona customary practices accorded to both men and women through the traditional poetry genres of *jikinyira* (protest poetry by female spouses), *mavingu* (protest poetry by male spouses), *bembera* (public protest poetry) and *nhango* (didactic poetry administered usually by grandparents). The writers' knowledge of these mechanisms has enabled them to construct their discourse for empowering marginalized sections of the community so that the family institution may be strengthened and salvaged from threats arising from shifting material conditions.

The Shona traditional mechanisms of communication of *jikinyira*, *mavingu*, *bembera* and *nhango* allowed for individual recognition within the larger institutions by way of mediation, negotiation and direct criticism, but within culturally-determined and accepted confines. As part of the discourse of giving voice and 'being' to individuals, these traditional mechanisms provided checks and balances within the institutional structures to protect women's voices and those of the marginalized. The irony in using these mechanisms is that whilst individual interests and preferences would be treated as private concerns, they were also given public and institutionalized fora so that inter-social and intra-social concerns could be addressed. These seeming contradictions make it imperative that an ethnographic analysis be used in the

reading of *Masimba*. The discourses to authorize ‘being’ are best understood in the context of Shona culture because the social practices these writers explore are largely steeped in Shona cultural values. In fact, they buttress Naomi Schor’s argument that ‘there is nothing outside or before culture, no nature that is not always and already enculturated’(in Murfin,1996:153).

The essay argues that *Masimba* provides discourse that is rooted in the structures of *everything* that governs the contributors’ lives – relationships, principles, values, food, vision, language, dress, accommodation, beliefs etc. An exploration of these structures shows that they have their basis in the Shona cultural conceptions about gender, and it is these conceptions that permeate people’s attitudes about gender roles (Haralambos and Holborn,1996). Lacan (in Murfin, 1996:263) argues that the individual or self is ‘in fact a product of the social order and its symbolic systems’. Thus, whilst these short stories may not necessarily be factual, the writers are by and large writing about institutions and constitutions they know and understand as Africans. The latter premise demands, as intimated earlier, that the analysis of *Masimba* be contextualized since the background and language used in the narratives have been particularized.

Scholars like Ngugi wa Thiongo (1981), Dell Hymes (1972) and J.R. Firth (1950), among others, have strongly argued for contextualized appreciation of texts because language is a signifier of social meanings. The writers themselves, having been socialized through that particular language, invariably reflect values and principles deriving from that language as a carrier of culture. The anthology, *Masimba*, therefore would best be appreciated from the premise of cultural criticism so as to avert some misreading of the text as a feminist project bent on gratifying an embittered section of the Zimbabwean society. The contributors articulate the looming challenges bedeviling the family institution and the different forms the challenges take. The writers’ sensitivity to these challenges directs the reader’s gaze to Shona culture as a culture that demonstrates a sensitivity to individual idiosyncrasies, whilst at the same time insisting on institutional cohesion and continuity. The contributors, therefore, attempt to raise the consciousness of their society in an effort to find alternatives that may foster and preserve family cohesion, whilst at the same time negotiating for space to empower women within the parameters of an acceptable cultural continuum.

The examination of *Masimba* thus demands the foregrounding of culture and cultural criticism as the requisite tools to be used in the appreciation

of the stories. The social meanings that underline the discourse in each short story formulate the writers' major concerns. The writers explore Shona cultural processes in a modern dispensation and how these processes influence the sustenance and survival of the Shona value systems. The justification of certain beliefs and social practices that these writers explore therefore comes under critical examination.

## Theoretical framework

Cultural criticism that formulates the basis of this chapter entails an investigation into how a people define and understand who they are and what they can be within the larger context of the structures set by the collective. It is a social theory that dwells on the particularized interpretation of texts. Justification for the use of cultural criticism derives from Lacan's argument that the 'individual' is 'a product of the social order and its symbolic systems' (in Murfin, 1996:263), an argument neatly summarized by J.R. Firth (1950) when he refers to every individual as a bundle of institutionalized roles.

The set of social, historical and cultural processes the writers bring into their stories therefore require critical scrutiny because of their significance in the way the text, *Masimba*, is ultimately interpreted. The relevance of cultural criticism as a tool lies in the fact that the writers make their stories fit snugly into the Shona world. The interpretive nature of cultural criticism insists that the appreciation of the text acknowledges the particularity and uniqueness of the cultural tenets of the Shona society that the writers are writing about and writing from. The theory, therefore, shuns an uncritical imposition of alternative theories in interpreting the writers' recreation of social reality.

This chapter argues that *Masimba* is a sociological reflection of the underlying ideologies, principles, beliefs, institutions, values and goals of the *Shona* world as embodied in the language and approaches the writers adopt in articulating their concerns. The writers dwell on the changing attitudes and consciousness which have been brought about by the evolving social structures and the changing material conditions. The social reality that they represent is in many ways a reflection of the dominant ideologies that are culturally determined.

One or two definitions of culture would help to illumine the appreciation of cultural criticism as a theory, notwithstanding that in many ways definitions of culture themselves are inevitably political because as social products, human

beings see their world and all that goes with it through society's ideology. Odetole and Ademola (1985:35) have this to say about culture:

Culture refers to *the total way of life of a society*. It is made up of its members' traditions, and beliefs, their behavior, dress, language, their work, their way of living, relationship network and their attitudes to life, the focus of group loyalties and the way they all perceive the world.

Odetole and Ademola's conception of culture concurs with Okot p' Bitek's (1986:13) view that culture is a people's way of life: 'Culture is philosophy as lived and celebrated in a society'. In African thought, culture is an integral part of the daily ordinary life.

The chapter argues that *Masimba* brings women's voices together, and allows them to offer their views regarding their place and role in society. Their stories invariably explore the beliefs, customs and practices as expressions of Shona culture. Whilst material conditions inadvertently shift with the passage of time, thereby influencing practices and beliefs, the fundamental values remain in place so that peoples' identities may be retained. This justifies this particular writer's references to the communication mechanisms of *jikinyira*, *mavingu*, *bembera* and *nhango*.

By its very nature, literature as a social discourse is partisan in its attempt to influence patterns of behaviour and beliefs. Thus, where cultural institutions are represented as favouring a particular gender, let it be clear to any reader that 'a culture, like a society, has to be conceived as in some sense existing in structures and representations' (Tomlinson, 1991:95). The structures, hierarchical as they are, are culturally legitimate for institutional cohesion and collective continuity. Thus, where individual women's struggles may be represented as feminist discourse, the reader should appreciate feminist criticism itself as part of a larger cultural discourse within a particularized context.

Cultural criticism as a social theory demands the abolition of artificial boundaries erected in the study of African societies and their evolving communities since problems affecting any member of the community would one way or another result in the collective institutions being dysfunctional. The lives of the individual families explored by the individual contributors cannot be atomized and clinically examined in abstraction, making it imperative that *Masimba* be appreciated from the premise that 'human consciousness

and the goal of that critical analysis should be to understand and show how that consciousness is itself forged and formed, to a great extent, by cultural forces' (Murfin, 1996:263). The chapter thus dwells on how the writers of the anthology recreate the social practices and cultural norms of their contemporary world, with the idea of reconstituting values that foster cohesion and uphold the family institution.

### Cultural criticism and *Masimba*

As indicated earlier, this chapter demonstrates that the women writers in *Masimba* successfully adopt and integrate their traditional knowledge systems in writing their short stories, contrary to assumptions that paint Shona women as passive victims of a patriarchal culture. These writers have risen to the challenge of interrogating social practices that have put the family under siege. At the core of their efforts is the challenge to recreate what they envision as the place of the woman as opposed to the conventional stereotypical representations that often deny women the opportunity to fully exploit their individual potentialities.

Ironically, the Shona traditional poetry genres of *jikinyira* and *mavingu* have traditionally accorded individuality to spouses within a marriage relationship so that spouses could be nurtured in a very personal way. These mechanisms ensured room for spouses to nurture and foster reciprocity in a marriage relationship as the basis for the growth and bonding of the family. To this end, therefore, indigenous African women have always actively participated in matters and affairs that impinge upon their intellectual, physical and emotional growth as well as the welfare of their families. One would venture to argue that these female writers are revitalizing and reconstituting communication strategies and social structures that 'modernity' has endeavoured to obliterate. After all, the Shona proverb, *Chirungurira chitenda, ukasataura uno fa nacho*, (Always lay bare all your concerns so that you may not pine to your death) makes dialogue imperative. The chapter argues that the short stories strive towards the discernment of a healthy family unit. The writers recognize the family as a fundamental and highly valued institution that gives credence to one's individuality, one's self-affirmation, one's self-esteem, one's self-acceptance and, ultimately, one's identity. This is underpinned by the writers' insistence on exposing impediments towards the recognition and attainment of values associated with the notion of family that include, among others, mutual respect and mutual responsibility.

Writing has helped Zimbabwean women to reclaim their voice and place that the colonial ideology in its subtle machinations had denied them. The argument that 'literature assumed literacy and print' (Brown, 1999:28) gives these short stories credence as literary references. They have become a vehicle through which the respective female contributors recreate and foster their vision of wholesome relationships. In fact, the stories confirm the observation that over the years, Shona women have manipulated mores and lores and made them part of an African worldview. For example, prominent maxims and proverbs have been fashioned in such a way that women's security is a prerogative in the African worldview, especially within the family institution. Some of these interesting maxims are as follows:

*Amai havarohwi, ukavarova vanokumukira.*

If you beat up your mother, her avenging spirit will haunt you.

*Ukarova mai unotanda botso.*

If you beat up your mother, misfortune will dog you.

*Mukadzi haarohwi.*

A wife cannot be beaten.

*Musha mukadzi.*

The woman is the anchor of the home.

*Mai mutorwa, haisi hama yako.*

You don't share the same blood with your mother, so never cross her path.

*Mwana ndimai.*

Only mothers can give sustenance to human life.

*Nhamo inhamo zvayo amai havaroodzwi.*

Mother is sacred and can therefore not be traded for anything.

The cited maxims make women, especially mothers, formidable forces of power and influence and untouchable in the Shona worldview. Such influence and its silent and salient contradictions is what the writers in *Masimba* envision and

seek to reinvigorate, thus allowing African women to re-appropriate their traditional space and publicly contribute in the affairs of their communities.

The traditional mechanisms endowed women with alternatives to what in the modern eye may appear insurmountable. Sadly, these mechanisms have been sidelined for a long time. The replicated stereotypes in the writings reflect a deep-seated desire to have particular practices upheld. They also reflect a broader set of psychological responses to the social, economic and political realities of their contemporary society. The writers further buttress their place and role as legislators of their communities. Given the shifting social space, particularly in the face of urbanization, mining communities, farming frontiers and mission stations, some traditional avenues of communication that thrived on secure traditional institutions, especially that of the family, have gradually given way to the exploitation and exclusion of women. This is the major concern that the writers explore, showing their resolve to raise the consciousness of their communities and to initiate social reform.

The act and skill of writing gives women writers relative freedom to air their views. Naturally, what this entails is that each individual writer is accorded individuality on the level of perceptions and consciousness about self, family, community and society, and not treated as an inseparable entity of a homogenous group of African women! Each short story as a refined text, therefore, accords the individual writers the opportunity to appreciate their own voices and personal convictions as typified in the concerns they articulate. Their efforts testify of a non-violent revolution that brings ordinary African women's voices into the mainstream discourses of literary and cultural studies.

These writers dwell on seemingly trivial issues, but ironically, it is these that give a sense of self-worth and make the players' lives meaningful and more fulfilling. How these mundanities impinge upon the individual woman's subjectivity, choices, perceptions, vision and how the same mundanities nurture and impinge upon the society's perceptions of culture, tradition, custom and morality is what these writers foreground, thereby bridging the distance between the private and the public spaces.

The concerns they raise are discussed and explored from a specific cultural standpoint, thus compelling the reader to recognize the specific forces that shape the experiences and perceptions of these writers. For instance, Keresia Chateuka's 'Chiramu' (Sexual banter) explores some contradictions that the culturally and socially sanctioned practice of sexual banter entails. This social practice legitimizes the husbands' injurious behaviour on their marriage partners

and elevates the ego and statuses of the *chiramu* beneficiaries at the expense of the wives' psychological stability. The story shows how some noble cultural practices are abused and their intended objectives therefore totally missed.

'Bedzapfuma' (Wanton abuser of family wealth) by Pelda Hove explores how the veneration of the libidinousness of men throws the same men into the mire of poverty and makes their wives sacrificial lambs as they are denied conjugal rights. The legitimate wife in this story diverts attention from this natural need by devoting herself to other family commitments because personal pride and principles do not allow her to sink to the same vegetable level as the husband. Culturally, among the Shona, it is the moral duty of a woman to be loyal to her husband, what feminists protest vehemently against as both exploitation and oppression of women (interestingly, the same image of woman as the centre of the campus that John Donne uses in Metaphysical poetry resurfaces here). It is worth noting that the abusive husband only invites the extended family when it comes to the payment of reparations. This comes out as selective allegiance to tradition. In fact, this abusive husband is a classic example of deviant conduct because he deliberately sidelines those cultural practices he sees as inconvenient to his interests. Although the story seems to venerate the woman's moral aptitude at the expense of her sexuality, it does not mean that the writer condones the husband's irresponsible behavior. Shona culture is shown to have subtle communication mechanisms that could protect women from succumbing to fatal health conditions like high blood pressure. The husband resorts to these when he is in dire need. Sadly, such mechanisms have been sidelined in the interests of the so-called human rights, the individual's right to privacy, and also regrettably, in the peddling of 'liberatory' feminist discourses that many times have culminated in the dismantling of indigenous institutions and structures. In its protest tone, the story, however, insists that the woman's strategic position as anchor in the home can only be affirmed if and when her physiological, material and spiritual needs are fully met. The writer takes a swipe at selective allegiance to tradition.

'Honye yemunhu' (The grub) by Barbara Makhalisa, though with a different thrust, explores a similar theme. The impressionable and avaricious husband almost loses his life to a foreign woman whom he assists to obtain a Zimbabwean marriage certificate. The victim-husband takes sanctuary in the rural home that the traditional wife is striving to maintain. His parasitic tendencies earn him the euphemistic label of a grub or *honye*. The husband's glory is short-lived and it is the wife who ultimately salvages both the marriage

and the husband's life. Several poems in the Zimbabwe Women Writers anthology, *Ngatisimuke:Nhapitapi Yenhorimbo* (2004), buttress the same argument about women's centrality in the upkeep of the Shona family.

'Hundi kwandiri' (Chaff is all I get) critiques the use of brutal force by a husband who cannot come to terms with his failure to share the responsibility of raising the family. As a father and husband, he has the mistaken belief that material provision is all that matters in marriage. He is oblivious to challenges of the modern dispensation, more so when most traditional protective mechanisms have been shattered. On whose shoulders does the responsibility of raising children lie? Like Gyekye (2003:85) who draws Africans' attention to their African cultural values in raising the family, the writer argues that parents are obliged to show their children the 'acceptable standards of social behaviour', which can only happen when they stay together as a family (Gyekye 2003:87), hammering the maxim that 'Absence does not bring up a child.' Gyekye puts it succinctly when he argues,

Part of the whole process of bringing up children in traditional African societies and leading them to acquire character traits acceptable to the society as good and worthwhile is the expectation common to all cultures that children will look to, and be influenced by, the behavior of the adult members of the lineage. This is why the wife in 'Hundi kwandiri' denies that she is solely responsible for the daughter's wayward conduct. Material provision by the father could not necessarily substitute the invaluable presence and bonding between the father and his children. What the story advocates, among other pressing issues, are mutual respect and mutual parental responsibility in raising the family. The wife earns herself some heavy battering, yet ironically, it is the husband who receives the 'errant' daughter's *lobola* (bridewealth) and squanders it alone. The story ridicules Shona men who equate male supremacy with abusiveness. Again, the story decries some African men's ignorance about cultural demands that has seen them succumbing to moral degeneration.

The writer foregrounds the challenge that goes with the responsibility of providing acceptable role models when children and families have been plucked and dumped into environments that are far removed from the sanctuary of the supportive traditional settings. The same question is raised in Virginia Mupondi's 'Kunyengedzwa hakuna akura' (Deception respects no age). The 'errant' girl child's conduct is a product of conflicting forces of modernity in the forms of Christianity, western education, the mission frontier and urbanization as opposed to the rural cultural mechanisms that would attempt

to foster general moral aptitude within the intricate and intertwined family institution. The traditional family structures would entrust each individual with roles and responsibilities that would make them accountable to the collective, what p'Bitek (1982) refers to as, 'man the unfree.' In this case, the Shona boy, girl, man or woman does not live solely for the gratification of the personal ego. Whilst individuals were accorded space, they had obligations and roles they owed the family institution both for its cohesion and continuity.

'Wadiwa sekuru' (Beloved uncle) interrogates the Shona concept of mothering that is not necessarily biologically-determined, but role-governed. The incestuous rape victim laments the aberration that characterizes the uncle's wayward conduct. The same theme is explored in Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue* (1997) when Zhizha mourns that her father, Muroyiwa, has drunk the deep waters of her womanhood. The writers are perturbed by the moral decadence that now undermines the social fabric, making the marginalized totally vulnerable. The family institution is heavily undermined and compromised by foreign egotistic tendencies. The story exposes the psychological trauma and permanent damage the violation imprints on the psyche of the victim. This protest is in line with the traditional *bembera* genre that helped to check perpetrators' immoral activities.

In the story, the uncle abdicates and reneges on his cultural duty of mothering. The new Coca-Cola dispensation has eroded life-sustaining values that kept African families bonded. The writer insists on restoring those principles upon which the humanity of the Shona family institution was partly premised.

'Natsa kwawabva' (Mend your past) by Musi Gloriosa Katerere and 'Shungu' (Heartache) by Memory Rugeedhla focus on women's participation in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. The stories explore and expose patriarchal brutality and Zimbabwe's insensitivity to the post-war trauma that has adversely affected the female ex-combatant. The stories also critique the concept of heroism in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. They also demand a re-evaluation of the concept of heroism in contemporary Zimbabwe so that the injustices female combatants endured during and after the war may be redressed. The liberation war appears to have robbed the incumbent female characters of the security that domesticity and home would have naturally provided. By participating in the war, they were traversing an otherwise male domain for which society seemed unprepared. Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi gives a more detailed critique in *For Better or Worse? Women and Zanla in Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle* (2000). The stories show that a measure of the female

combatants' womanhood, humanity and dignity that the war of liberation took away can only be restored by their reintegration into recognized institutional structures of the home and family. The female ex-combatants yearn for both marriage and family as stabilizing and nurturing institutions that could play a major role in helping them regain proper cultural bearings to enable them to become socially acceptable. This again emphasizes the fact that in the African worldview, identity is always forged within the socially sanctioned structures and institutions.

Ironically, decades after the war that sought to pave way for equality by eradicating all forms of discrimination within the Zimbabwean society, after the disbursement of the demobilization gratuities, not much has been done to rehabilitate and reintegrate the ex-combatant. Alexander Kanengoni (1997) explores in greater detail the amnesia, trauma and exploitation of the ex-combatant in post-independence Zimbabwe. The psychological violence in these stories demonstrates how vulnerable the already 'unnatural' or 'odd' woman is after she ventured out of her cultural oeuvre. In spite of their heroic exploits as national patriots, culturally they would be less of women if they remained outside the much-revered family institution. It appears that integration into the family restores to them a sense of dignity, wholeness and some semblance of sanity, as well as purposefulness in life. It is the basic structures of their society that can afford them the sense of actualization that they yearn for.

'Chipoko munhu' (The live ghost) by Colette Mutangadura and 'Nhumbi dzemufi' (The deceased's estate) by Keresia Chateuka confront the reader with the challenges of the Shona customary practice of inheritance. Inheritance practices are now subject to manipulation, exploitation and abuse by the surviving blood relatives who are driven purely by avarice. People now hold onto the form and not the spirit of this invaluable customary practice that saw Shona women endowed with private property rights. The deceased's aspirations to invest for their nucleus families are ignored under the pretext of safeguarding cultural values. The story critiques the material and spiritual bases upon which Shona traditional beliefs on inheritance are premised because the ideal traditional environment no longer obtains. These women writers are suggesting a re-vision of values and practices so that the security of the surviving family members is ensured.

Shona culture insists on safeguarding women's private property rights even if they enjoy similar material benefits like any other family member.

Both stories expose the unwholesome implications as well as their impact on the surviving spouse and children. Traditionally, the woman's possessions, both as wife and mother – livestock, agricultural produce, kitchen utensils, clothing, etc – remain hers even beyond the grave, and only her people can administer her estate. The story deplores the prostitution and abuse of this much-revered philosophy.

The concepts of African manhood and wifehood, though seemingly degrading women and pushing them into subordination and docility, also come under close scrutiny. In the traditional African conception, a man's worth is esteemed and recognized through the well-being of his wife. This means that the husband is expected to feed, clothe, provide for, and nurture his spouse emotionally and spiritually. The implication is that wives owe their beauty to their husbands. Failure by the husbands to nurture this beauty in all its respects entails a deficient manhood in the society's eyes. This belief may superficially buttress the idea of domination of women, which aspect takes us to the whole idea of power dynamics in African cosmology. The man must deserve, rather than demand respect from the wife. His manhood and masculinity are manifest through some tangible evidence of social responsibility. S. Makamanzi in '*Akasiyiwa asina kufungira*' (Abrupt ditching) demonstrates that women's material, spiritual and psychological security are a prerogative in the Shona worldview. Real African men demonstrate their manhood by rising up to the challenges of raising a happy family. Emma Chitehwe's '*Kufundisa mwana*' (Educating one's offspring) also explores similar concerns. This does not translate women into minors, but is rather an insistence on gendered roles between man and woman as culturally envisioned. Indirectly, the woman becomes the barometer by which the husband's manhood is measured. The question of power dynamics in the Shona family becomes complex and sophisticated in the manner it should be appreciated. It is the intertwined and interrelatedness of roles that defy the dichotomy that other forms of exploration seek to impose on gendered roles in the Shona society. The 'inevitable and necessary complementarity of men and women' (Ba, 1989:99) become the premise upon which relationships and roles within the Shona family institution are governed. It appears that in the absence of the other, the ultimate 'being' can never be realized.

The centrality of the larger extended family is graphically captured in Keresia Chateuka's '*Mavambo namagumo*' (The beginning and the end) and Chakambodei Chirandu's '*Chenai mwoyo*' (Be tolerant) that both explore the

challenges that Shona wives face in their culturally determined roles of caregivers. The stories expose some of the raptures and schisms that women can only overcome with the support of the larger family.

'Zvemhuri' (Of family issues) by S. Makamanzi brings in a spiritual dimension to this often 'deodorized' theme. It is apparent that illness among the Shona is not necessarily confined to the domain of biology and clinical scientific explorations, as the 'being' of the Shona person is intricately couched into and carved by psychic and spiritual forces. In spite of women's innovation and resilience, they need to recognize the authority of the metaphysical world and their own limitations in times of illness. Thus, apart from being therapeutic and an escape valve, writing becomes an avenue through which these female writers explore the challenges they face in the course of the execution of their envisioned duty as caregivers in times of illness. They admit that women can only survive the trauma of illness if they get moral encouragement and support from the larger family institution. Without familial cohesion, such support can never be garnered. Bourdillon (1993) explores this aspect of Shona cosmology in greater detail.

'Hupenyu' (Life's intrigues) by Valeria Chaukura explores the centrality and intertwined nature of (*roora*) bridewealth to procreation in the Shona worldview. Apart from elevating the man to a respectable social status, marriage endows him with the much enviable instrument to assert his manhood (Kwame Gyekye, 2003). Part of the manifestation of this manhood is shown through making the wife pregnant. The definite unnerving assumption is that the woman's primary role in marriage is to bear children. Infertility is rarely attributed to the man. This translates the woman into a fertile garden that should receive any planted seed and make it germinate. Thus, both African manhood and womanhood can be measured through procreation. This notion has exposed numerous women to injuries inflicted by men in their search for children who would bear their names. Michael Bourdillon (1998:42) argues that cultural practices and beliefs are such that family wealth and strength rest on the family's big numbers, and this idea puts pressure on the couple to procreate, but particularly on the wife.

Ruby Magosvongwe's 'Matsotsi' (The dissemblers) explores the unprecedented challenges the Shona family must contend with in the face of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, particularly women as both wives and mothers. It shows the unusual stamina women show when confronting bereavement and grief. A host of questions arise from the way women are portrayed in this story.

Does it mean that women's crying is a mere farce? Does it mean they have an unfathomable hardness or some veiled insensitivity? Where do they draw their inner strength? Where does culture or Shona tradition come in, and can a dysfunctional family sustain the horrors associated with AIDS? The answers to these questions are not always forthcoming, making women very complex and not always easy to understand. A close examination of both the mother-in-law's and the daughter-in-law's conduct in this story would leave some readers baffled.

It appears that the influence of Shona culture, and to some extent Christianity, urges women to be hopeful in the face of life's adversities. In fact, Michael Bourdillon (1998) argues that death among the Shona is not necessarily regarded as the end of life, but a continued bonding between the deceased and the surviving family. The living and the dead are part of a continuous circle and cycle. Similar beliefs are manifest in Akan cosmology as shown in Ayi Kwei Armah's cycles in *Fragments* (1969). This cycle indirectly becomes a vehicle of spiritual and psychological sustenance in the African worldview.

The daunting challenges that come with the AIDS pandemic also extend to cover the newly envisioned place women must occupy in the new economic dispensation with regards to material provision for the family. Though from a different angle, Precity Mabuya's 'Ndiniwo here?' (Could this be me?) examines the same concern by juxtaposing traditional expectations of an ideal wife to the practical reality of material demands. Her newly constructed cultural role demands that she be economically empowered in case of the eventualities that Ruby Magosvongwe's 'Matsotsi' foregrounds. She decries the urban wife's life of material and economic dependence on her husband. When the wife in this story gets a job in Zambia with the UNDA, her husband cannot release her to go and work away from the family. It is only after persuasion from the male colleagues that he agrees to join the wife in Zambia. The husband thus forgoes traditional male supremacy for upward social mobility as dictated by the prevailing conditions. The story envisions a sensitivity to the shifting material conditions, whilst at the same time trying to salvage the African family. Mabuya advocates a selective and critical acceptance of certain forms of modernity and culture if the African family is to survive.

Each of the examples cited above venerates the multifaceted strengths and numerous forces that seek to undermine both the continuity of the family institution as well as the position of the African woman within that family. The fact that these women have articulated these concerns through writing, amounts

to what Muchemwa (2001:73) refers to as 'a reclaiming of a displaced African female tradition because in Southern Africa there is a female tradition that is as old as the male tradition.' Through their literature, they attempt to eradicate the female stereotypes that characterize many Zimbabwean literary works, thus rendering Shona women as instrumental in shaping their destinies. The women in their stories and the writers themselves re-appropriate their voice and place as legislators of their communities as reflected in Shona cultural traditions. The writers refuse to allow the gender dichotomies created by the colonial ideology to keep their female characters enslaved.

## Conclusion

The anthology *Masimba* critiques and recreates social reality and gender roles as perceived by Shona women writers. The stories highlight aspects that undermine the humanity of the Shona people in general, not just women. The fact that all the concerns are articulated from the threshold of the family shows how much value is attached to this invaluable institution in the Shona worldview. The family as the cornerstone for everyone's continued survival, offers the space within which rights are obtained.

The writers insist that Shona values and principles be upheld, thus showing their refusal to be swayed where issues of 'identity' are concerned. Identity formation and anchorage of the individual begin with the stability and preservation of the family institution, as shown by Charles Mungoshi in *Walking Still* (1997). Once the institutions of marriage and family are safeguarded, individuals may find it easier to obtain a wholesome life, and the continued survival of the Shona people as a collective is also guaranteed. These writings bridge the distance between the private and public spaces in their attempt to contextualize the challenges women face in their contemporary society and the solutions they envisage for the same.

*Masimba* deliberately avoids prescribing solutions to some of the social problems highlighted in the short stories, thereby suggesting that people must work out viable alternatives as determined by their respective relationships and environments. Characters are therefore left to work out alternatives that tally with their peculiar conditions, thus acknowledging that even within the same cultural divide, differences have to be accommodated and the uniqueness of personalities acknowledged. Like Ba's Romatoulaye and Aisatou in *So Long a Letter*, each woman emerges with some individual vision and convictions regardless of the shared experiences within the same cultural divide. This

argument, therefore, entails some acknowledgement and celebration of individual idiosyncrasies within the larger cultural domain, a point that may appear contradictory.

The general exclusion of women's voices from Zimbabwe's literary canon that the editor alludes to in the foreword to the anthology gives evidence of indigenous women's marginalization. This was a deliberate colonial policy to fragment the Shona family and render it dysfunctional. This is evident in a plethora of Eurocentric debates that keep alienating the African people from those values that bonded them. Because of a lower book and functional literacy level, the majority of Zimbabwean women have largely been confined to matrimony and home. This state of affairs culminated in the paucity of literary texts by women, and has resulted in women being denied the invaluable space that culture and tradition accorded them. Consequently, it is the male voice that has been canonized and passed on to Zimbabwean children largely through the school curriculum. The anthology thus attempts to empower women by redeeming the traditional space they are deemed to have culturally occupied.

As already indicated, *Masimba* is a testimony of the spirit and philosophy of the traditional poetic genres of *jikinyira*, *mavingu*, *nhango* and *bembera* transformed into prose. The writers are consistent in their insistence on the complementarity of man and woman in marriage - no one wants to go it solo. Alternatives and solutions to challenges confronting the characters are sought within the very traditional structures themselves. Like Charles Mungoshi's 'Sacrifice' in *Walking Still*, the African belief system that lies embedded in the family members' psyches, re-asserts itself at the moment of crisis when families group together to solve health crises (Rino Zhuwarara, 2001). These writers advocate collectivity when dealing with challenges that confront the family. The argument is that questions of rights and individual preferences may not necessarily prevail unless a larger harmonious social environment is created and safeguarded. In fact, the idea of 'rights' in the Shona worldview is relative because these rights may only be guaranteed if the larger institutions are functioning well. The argument becomes the egg and hen puzzle because of the importance attached to both the individuals and the institutions they comprise.

*Masimba* succeeds in communicating the writers' concerns using their knowledge of Shona values, principles and beliefs. They translate their discourse on cultural norms and practices towards creating an African world where both male and female 'invoke canons of indigenous traditions as well

as adopted non-indigenous values...to justify or contest attitudes, beliefs, and actions' (M. B. Cham in Eldred Jones et al, 1987:90). The chapter highlights the need for mutual responsibility and mutual respect in the negotiation for space in the family and other larger social institutions. A superficial reading paints *Masimba* as a contestation of attitudes, beliefs and practices that generally favour one side of the society. A closer reading, however, projects the desire for harmonious social relationships - a symphony born out of diversity. From this reader's perspective, the writers unanimously agree and adopt the view that Ramatoulaye articulates in her concluding remarks to Aissatou in *So Long a Letter* (1981:88-89):

I remain persuaded of the inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman...The success of the family is born of a couple's harmony...The nation is made up of all the families...The success of a nation therefore depends inevitably on the family.

Since interdependence and complementarity of roles within the Shona family govern relationships, individual liberation and individual rights become relative. *Masimba* indeed sensitizes both the contributors and readers to responsibilities and obligations that come with privileges. It is the misuse and distortion of privileges bestowed by tradition that the contributors critique. The very idea of responsibility leaves no room for 'selective adherence to tradition' (Eldred Jones et al 1987:90). Thus, both man and woman should never be free from social and cultural responsibility.

Like the human body, general social and family problems are intertwined and interrelated such that they need to be discussed and approached within the broader context of acceptable cultural norms and practices. In fact, Munashe Furusa (in E. M. Chiwome et al, 2000:82-84), could not have expressed it any better when he argued that, 'Zimbabweans can only benefit from global cultures and experiences and transform themselves for the better if they make their cultural and historical knowledge central in their lives.' Such is the challenge that *Masimba* in part takes up.

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## Memory Chirere

This chapter argues that whilst the traditional Shona woman had the latitude to compose and perform love poetry specifically for her husband in bed (*madanha*), the modern Shona woman poet of the written word tends to avoid, in several ways, writing fully-fledged love poems in the Shona language. Working with selected Shona poems and poets from across the numerous poetry anthologies in Shona, this chapter suggests that this is an anomaly that is hinged on a number of social circumstances in which the Shona woman poet writes today.

In the Zimbabwean arts discourse, there is a certain lack of respect for love songs, love poems, love plays and love novels. Love matters tend to be associated with the superfluousness of youth only. Arguably, the bulk of Zimbabwe scholarship on the arts opt for the grand themes like the phenomenal changes brought by modernity, life, death the war of liberation and corruption. Yet, one might argue that an exploration of how communities locate themselves in love matters could be an equally useful window through which one might understand particular communities. How people love or talk about their love lives says as much about them as their temperament and preferences.

The first published Shona book in verse is Herbert Chitepo's *Soko Risina Musoro* (1958), and, beginning with *Madetembedzo Akare NeMatsva* (1959), over twelve anthologies of Shona poetry have been published (Rino Zhuwarara, in S. Serafin, 1996). The majority of them contain at least some poems by women. After observing some of the key Shona collections, one clearly notes that love poems written in Shona by women generally avoid explicit references to 'women in love'. Most of the poems are also very rarely from a woman's point of view. In the very few poems that portray women in love, there are usually no in depth and meaningful explorations of the love of women for their men. Compared to their male counterparts' love poems, female Shona poets appear handicapped and less convincing.

From the outset, this strikes one as ironical, at least in the context of the history of the Shona people. Shona women, like most African women, were the keepers of social memory. In most cases it is the women who performed family or clan totemic poems more regularly than the menfolk. This was possible because it was the woman who thanked the hunter when he came

from the forest, laden with game meat, fruit, honey and other goodies. It is also the woman who taught her child his/her totemic poem. Family history was recorded in these renditions and therefore women sustained family memory. In fact they edited, revised, modified and scrutinized family narratives over the ages, identifying the ups and downs of the family fortunes.

In line with that, most of the story telling was done by mothers and grandmothers, long before the male child could join the menfolk at the men's place (*dare*). Therefore, women were ideological workers whose influences on society were both subtle and powerful.

The works of researchers and collectors like A. Hodza, E. Majaya and Haasbroek show that Shona women also composed a form of love poems that were explicit, subtle and useful in describing the relationship between men and women both in the public and domestic spheres. In Aaron Hodza's *Ugo Hwamadzinza AvaShona* (1974:6), this version of love poetry is part of totemic praise poetry called *madanha* (verbal sexual antics). This is a form of love poetry composed and recited by wives for their husbands during lovemaking.

Although Hodza's collections and researches are a 'man's work,' what is important to note is that this poetry demonstrates that the Shona wife was not inhibited from describing neither the sexual act, nor hers and her husband's body. She asked for a certain kind of handling and she could describe verbally what she and her husband were going through. This is a pointed, candid and purposeful poetry. A reading of *madanha* shows that Shona women spent some time looking and observing in order to be that explicit in their poetry.

Years later, Emmanuel Chiwome (1996:26) was to identify that a good Shona wife had to be a good poet and that she actually had to have some remarkable poetic license in order to impress. The following (part of) a poem collected by A. Hodza could be a good example:

Hekani Shumba

Ndorohwa nebuka

Rinoomesa mitezo yangu seruware.

Radzirai Shumba

Musanyenya muchiurura pamusoro.

Dzisai murove hwendedzo

E-e Shumba!

Mazondibaya mbariro dzechityu (Ibid:26).

That's it Lion!  
I'm getting excited  
Don't scratch the surface  
Search the depth  
That's it Lion!

You have reached the soft spot (E. Chiwome's translation in *ibid*).

Such poems are some of the most explicit and erotic compositions ever made in the Shona language. In the introduction to *Ugo Hwamadzinza AvaShona* (*ibid*:6), Hodza backs away from publishing some such poems:

Idzi nhetembo dzerudzi urwu... Ndedzomugudza. Dzingave dzakareba  
Kana pfupi maaererano nemagumo engoma. Mamwe acho handina  
kuanyora nokuti akarema kuanyora.

These are poems for love-making. They can be long or short depending on how long the act lasts (on each encounter). I didn't reproduce some of them here because they might offend.

Although one might argue that this performance and rendition called *madanha* was necessitated by a well-guaranteed sense of privacy (of the bedroom) during the sexual act, the idea that women in one household had more or less a 'standard' set of poems for their husband means that this poetry was actually 'published' and was a public secret. In a polygamous set-up a husband could easily separate the clumsy poets from the very nuanced and more creative ones amongst the wives. Therefore the secretiveness of this kind of poetry is relative.

However, Shona women's 'freedom' in *madanha* is in sharp contrast with more recent poems in Shona that are written and published in book form. In this poetry the Shona woman poet reflects genuine hesitation to either describe the whims of women in love, this despite the recurrent claims that 'educated' women tend to be freer than their grandmothers. This hesitation runs through in some love poems written in Shona in many of the Shona poetry anthologies with very few exceptions. The hesitation happens in different and numerous guises. In making such an observation, one is aware that even the 'modern' Shona women could still be performing *madanha* in bed. The claim remains technical: Shona women poets, for various reasons, have not yet claimed their

'freedom of expression' to the extent of being as explicit about sex on paper as in the bedroom. That claim, however, does not discount the fact that there could be other forms of expression available to women other than the written word.

For instance, although E. Mukunga could easily pass as a leading woman poet in the Shona language, she rarely adopts a female persona when she writes about love. This means she is keener to look at this issue through the eyes of a man. Although it is legitimate for any artist to look at the world through his or her chosen eyes, the fact remains that Mukunga's choice is unusual and makes statements about her standpoint as far as women issues are concerned.

In Mukunga's better-known love poems like 'Farisai mwana wandaida' (Farisai, whom I used to love) and 'Mudiwa wangu' (My darling), the persona is almost always a man in love - reflecting on his love affairs with a woman. In typical man fashion, Mukunga's persona pines with love. His heartbreaks are unabated and for acres and acres of space, the man wonders without arriving at any pedestal, why women tend to jilt him at will. In most of Mukunga's poems, if the women are not jilting the men, then they are swindling men of their hard-earned cash. In these poems, women are notorious and elusive. One classic example is the poem 'Ndakadywa naSarah', (I was swindled by Sarah), which makes a justifiable attack on prostitution, but fails to reflect on conditions that create prostitutes like Sarah.

Reading Mukunga's poems, one wonders why her women are not offered opportunity to respond or not given space to project their own voices. Mukunga labours to adopt the masculine voice with which she is clearly not familiar. As a result, her poems tend to be longish, indulgent and almost forced. The first stanza of 'Farisai mwana wandaida', for example, rings with a disappointing naivety:

Chawakandirambira chii, nhai Farisai?  
Hawaingondiudza chandakutadzira?  
Nechandakasiya kureva chaiva chii?  
Musi wandaifamba ndiri pane rako divi  
Dai wakangondiudzawo zvako  
Zvinoitwa nevakafanira kunzi vako (77).

Why did you jilt me, Farisai  
Why wouldn't you pin-point my faults?  
I was always open with you.  
That day as we walked side by side  
You could have just told me  
How one should qualify to be yours.

Her lines seem to come from the mind instead of the heart. They read like prose and lack the measured and calculated sense usually associated with good poetry. Ini 'Mudiwa wangu' (My dear loved one), Mukunga is at her clumsiest, with her last stanza going:

Pane vamwe vanokudawo ini vachindisema  
Iniwozve vamwe vanondida vachindishaiwa  
Swere neni kombe kuti ndingokurasiswa.  
Inga maziso azvimbva nokutarisa nzira,  
Ndichiti kuda nhasi zvichazadziswa.  
Mufanikiso wako ndakauchengeta pakanaka  
Kuti udzoke uchiuwana wakanaka (82).

There are those who like you and dislike me.  
The others want me but won't get me.  
Persuading me all day to drop you.  
My heart is sore with expectation  
Hoping it is today that you come.  
I have put your picture on a safe place  
So that you find it intact.

However, Mukunga is not alone in portraying how men suffer from heartbreak. Most of M. Mushai's poems are also of similar tendencies. In 'Dekadza mwoyo wangu' (Give my soul some rest), a male persona worships a woman for her love, pleading and assaulting her with love niceties in about thirteen stanzas in very melodramatic ways too. There is here some kind of agony that Mushai definitely mistakes for courtship. There is also a lack of subtlety and the characteristic spontaneity of the Shona suitor. The Shona suitor played hide and seek with the object of his love, using words sparingly and applying useful dozes of ambivalence.

Later, when one comes across Mushai's poem entitled 'Rudo' (Love), one hopes that the poet will give the reader opportunity to reflect on love from a woman's point of view. However, it is not to be. Mushai goes on and on, trying to do what older poets before her had done – lecturing the reader on what love is and how many shades of love there are in the universe.

But Mushai, unlike Mukunga, saves her face in the two poems, 'Nhai iwe mudiwa wangu' (My dear darling) and 'Wavhundunura pfimbi yedu' (You've exposed our secret), in which at least some female voices talk to their husbands about what they feel about being abandoned. These poems almost become good attempts had it not been, unfortunately, for their uninspired flow. There is also here some reckless over-dramatization of how a woman cannot stay alone, even for a day. The abandoned women wail without a sense of balance, giving very simplistic explanations of their circumstances. These are women one can only pity without admiring.

In that regard, *Ngatisimuke: Nhaphitapi Yenhorimbo*, the latest collection of poems published in 1998 but thoroughly revised in 2004, invites great expectations for several reasons. First, this is a Zimbabwe Women Writers (ZWW) members' only collection and one anticipates more nuanced and self conscious female voices since the organization's known and noble vision is to promote women's writings. In the introduction to their first edition of short stories, ZWW director, Chiedza Msengezi (in 'Preface' to *Masimba*, 1996), had spelt out very clearly the ideological role of ZWW especially as captured in its books:

These pieces (short stories) are testimony to the fact that (Women of Zimbabwe) no longer look down upon themselves. They do not fear to be chided, either. They are not shy to come out into the open about who they are, how they are treated and what they are capable of doing themselves. They are now confident that whatever they do or write should be read by all Zimbabweans.

However, *Ngatisimuke*'s success, in the case in question, is controversial. For instance one Elphin Mutemeru, writing about thirty-two years after Mushai and Mukunga, is still keen on writing about the love of a man for a woman. In 'Ndaikuda wena' (I really loved you), the male persona's heart breaks for one Vimbai. As if Mutemeru is not yet done with exposing the man in despair, her

adjacent poem entitled 'Shamiso mudiwa' (My beloved Shamiso) takes us through the same age old paces.

It is as if women poets in Shona have a rule: never to use female voices in love poems! It is as if they are convinced that only male voices are suitable for describing love. But writing in 2004, one hoped that the metaphor that women are now modern and free and can speak about themselves was true.

However, there are some love poems in *Ngatisimuke* that deserve special mention. They are on the brink of overturning the traditions of these Shona love poems written by women. They explore various perspectives of women in love. Maureen Mataranyika, for example, captures the combative voices of women in love although her poems tend to be anti-husband protest poems instead of focusing on love. Her poem 'Ndaizivei' (How could I have known) is one of the very few poems by women in the Shona language where the persona dwells for a remarkable length on the process of being wooed by a man. It is an uninhibited poem whose most exciting stanza goes:

Paakatanga kukanda shoko  
Ndakati hekani waro manonoka muchareva  
Paakazondipa nhumbi ndakati  
Vari pasi vandireva  
Ndaizivei kuti achave murume wangu (39).

When he proposed love

I just couldn't wait

I thanked heavens

And I hadn't guessed he would be mine

But soon after that, the poem becomes a fully-fledged protest poem as it juxtaposes the man's humility during the courtship period against his violent ways in matrimony. Innocentia Motsi's poems in the anthology in question also use the female love voice before gravitating to matrimonial protests.

At best, the Shona woman can only write some kind of protest love poetry and not all-out love poetry. Most of the contemporary Shona women poets like Chiedza Msengezi, Pelda Hove, Peggy Rusike and Keresia Chateuka (all published in *Ngatisimuke*) tend to dwell largely on this matrimonial protest. They would not dwell on what is felt when love was still hot.

Although no one can legitimately demand that women poets should follow the example of male poets, the deeper part of the irony of Shona love poetry is that, in fact it is left to the male poets to represent both males and females in love in a way that is creative, flexible and explorative. The name of Hamutyinei comes easily to one's mind. The ready examples are his 'Kana wamutanga musikana' (When you begin to propose to a girl), 'Swedera pandiri mudiwa Sekai' (Come closer, beloved Sekai) and 'Ndiye wandaireva' (She is the one I talked about to you once). In the first poem, the persona reflects on the ups and downs of courting a Shona girl. It is a remarkably memorable poem that tickles the soul regardless of the number of times one reads it. 'Ndiye wandaireva' is even more appealing, carrying some of the best descriptions of a girl in the Shona language. It has inspired many other artists and one leading Zimbabwean musician, Marshal Munhumumwe, has made his own version of the poem in one of his songs. Probably the most appealing stanza is the third one that goes:

Vhudzi rake ruswiswi rwebani pachirimo

Meso ake akapfekedzwa tsitsi, rudo nengoni,

Matama ake akaurungwa sembiya yomwenga.

Pakati pematama iwayo pakanzi dzi, kapunokwa

Mukanwa make mune mukaka, meno chechtere

Nhai Vimbai mutsipa sowebehiza rashe

Uya kuno uzondiona zvakandiwana"

Her hair is like the green grass in the vlei

Her eyes are endowed with mercy and humility

Her cheeks are round like a damsel's plate

Between those cheeks sits a long Caucasian nose

There is milk in her mouth of perfect teeth

Vimbai whose neck is like that of the chief's horse

Come over and visit me, dear one (Hamutyinei, in *Mabvumira Enhetembo*, 1969:33).

The language here is personal and gravitates towards the mischievously superlative. One wonders why we do not have poems in Shona, by a woman, dwelling on the 'beauty' of manhood or poeticizing on how it feels to be wooed! Something like, 'Kana uchinge watangwa nemukomana' (When a man decides to woo you).

There is also Vitalis Nyawaranda's 'Ndokuudza sei nhai Jonah?' (Jonah, how can I tell you about my love for you?), in which there is an exploration of how a girl burns inside for a man's love. The strength of that poem is in the attempt by the male poet to do the inverse and delve into the very personal soul of a woman who pines for a man.

Zimbabwean women's love poetry that is explicit tends to flourish more in the English language. Lillian Masitera and Kristina Rungano are good examples. Some of Rungano's poems in *A Storm Is Brewing* explore the distinct romantic passions of a woman, something that a poet like Chiedza Msengezi has not yet done in Shona. In 'This morning', Rungano talks about 'our savage rudeness in purity/...your hands touched mine in silken caress' and 'How I yearn (for you)/ I feel you here again with me' (in Flora Wild, 1988:112).

Therefore one could say that the language that one uses is not unrelated to what one can or cannot write about. Language comes with its cultural license and taboos. There is a clear distinction between what a Shona person can and cannot say in an open forum. Sex matters cannot be explored in a public or open forum. Writing for publication is writing for a public forum and the 'modern' Shona woman poet, regardless of her 'education' and 'freedom' cannot dare go public about passion and love. However, that does not mean that *madanha* as the secret genre of poetry has died. In fact it would be interesting to research and come up with the new status of *madanha* today. It would be equally interesting to see the kind of love poems that the likes of Chiedza Msengezi, Chateuka and others would write in the English Language. It appears, with the examples of Rungano and Masitera who write in English, that the English language would also give Msengezi and Chateuka some 'license' into taboo areas.

However, over and above language and its cultural convenience or inconvenience, it is important here to state some circumstances of politics of publishing. In Zimbabwe women generally took to writing much later than men. These women could be adopting the male persona most of the times that they write love poems in Shona probably because that had been the long established tradition. They are caught up in a form of male hegemony.

It is also a social fact in Zimbabwe that by the time women take to the pen, they are usually already past their courtship days and would very rarely brood over strictly love matters. The dominance of love protest poetry in poems by women as seen in the case of Chiedza Msengezi's poetry in *Tipeiwo Dariro* (1994) is therefore not accidental. Once the woman takes to writing, she is

under pressure to talk about her immediate plight – the married woman and her matrimonial woes.

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# The problematics of a feminist ontology: Reflections on the Zimbabwe Women Writers poetry project - *Ngatisimuke: Nhapitapi yeNhorimbo*

Francis Matambirofa

## Introduction

This chapter focuses on a variety of issues that relate to gender and Zimbabwean literature produced by women,<sup>1</sup> with particular reference to the Zimbabwe Women Writers' poetry anthology *Ngatisimuke: Nhapitapi yeNhorimbo*<sup>2</sup>, henceforth, *Ngatisimuke*. The quest is to interrogate the extent to which women's writings are inspired by the postmodernist feminist philosophy. It is significant that we clarify from the outset that we shall not be bogged down by the drudgery of formalist textual analysis of poems or poets as such. Our chief objective is to undertake a broad analysis of the most fundamental issues raised by women, and also to account for the forces that shape their literary subjectivity.

There are four fundamental reasons why we have chosen to focus on the anthology in question. First, it is a work of art composed by women whose gendered ontology, as it finds expression in literature, intersects with our quest of theorizing on and characterizing the problematics of gender. Secondly, it is a work that is produced under the aegis of women who make an express commitment to promote Zimbabwean women writers<sup>3</sup>, the complaint inferable from the same being that women's literature has been neglected. It thus becomes more compelling to study women's literature given such critical pronouncements by feminist writers like Dangarembga, who, as quoted by Carole Boyce-Davies (1995: 29), declares that women's writing means:

[W]omen write about the things that move them...Female writing comes from the consciousness of being a woman and the problems that arise from that.

The third point is motivated by the commonly accepted notion that poetry represents a vehicle through which one's deepest and most distilled thoughts may be expressed. The insinuation is that through poetry, Zimbabwean women have provided themselves with a vehicle through which they can articulate a

subjective gendered ethos that is uniquely different and free from patriarchal incarceration. Finally, the said anthology provides ease of access to a 'representative sample' of minds that are committed to a commonality of purpose.

In the context of Zimbabwe and elsewhere, we take it for granted that the broad agenda is one that espouses the spirit of women's solidarity and/or emancipation in furthering locally what ultimately is a feminist global project to create space for women. By examining poetry, the assumption is that the concerns by women prevailing therein, may be safely extended to cover other forms of literature. Since the consciousness of the individual woman writer is presumed to be relatively free from patriarchal eavesdropping and subterfuge, the expectation here is predicated on the assumption that by studying these poems, one catches women's subjectivity at liberty – free, as it were, from the dictates of patriarchal canonicity.

To that end, women's writing such as the one that will be examined here naturally provokes keen interest in a sworn and bona fide member of the 'patriarchal establishment' such as the current writer. The background against which this curiosity is fired could perhaps be taken for granted within the current context. This interest springs from the curiosity and desire to examine how women (re)present or carve themselves subjective space in literature. In the same vein, it would be gratifying to decipher and establish the extent to which women's writing may be different (if at all) from that of their male counterparts in terms of a) the issues they grapple with in literature; b) their thematic concerns (or 'fixations'); c) their portrayal of themselves (i.e., women); d) their depiction of men (the other), and e) the way they paint society/life in general. This chapter therefore hopes to systematically interrogate and ultimately unmask that which defines the ontology of women in literature.

The need to examine women's perception of society arises out of women's active participation and contribution to its dynamic change and maintenance. That the 'escape hatch' from (patriarchal) society is closed even to the most flagrant of feminists is given credence to by several pieces of evidence. Carole Boyce-Davies (1995:29), for instance, records an interview that Flora-Wild conducted with Dangarembga whose essence goes to show how a feminist writer is apparently hamstrung to the 'fetters' of (patriarchal) society. Says Dangarembga:

[G]ood female writing can put that [the consciousness of being a woman] in a wider context, realizing that what is particular to me or to us as a group stems from the general problems of society... So one has to move from the individual woman to the group and from there to the fundamental causes.

The woman writer is thus reminded that she can after all only operate within the confines and conventions of social space (in which no female enclave is provided for). The problematics of the feminist ontology lie in the apparent refusal of the enterprise to address the existence of variables relating to the construction of society that appear to be gender-neutral; variables whose primitive objective are assumed to be first and foremost, the 'orderly' preservation and propulsion of society. Such variables are anthropologically inferable from the logic of the evolution of society from primordial through to modern times. As long as the feminist is, as it seems, unable to convincingly prove that women are not beneficiaries of this architecture of social structure/organization, with or without the tutelage of men – they too must be as 'guilty of oppression' as men. As things stand, to prove otherwise remains the foremost burden of the feminist. At any rate, it does not follow that patriarchy is a social system in which women are no better than objects. Quite to the contrary, Appiah (1992:184) cautions against the dangers of such blind stereotypical representation of women, 'Never assume that individual women cannot gain power under patriarchy... Never confuse a matrilineal society with a society where women are in public control'. From these statements, one can arrive at the conclusion that the exercise of power is not a monolithic and homogenous concept, both intra-sexually and inter-sexually. In fact, the observations we make here are in part congruent to Jane Flax's comments (in Clark et al, 1979:75) regarding the ambivalent position of men and women in society when she writes:

From the perspective of social relations, men and women are both prisoners of gender, although in highly differentiated but interrelated ways. That men appear to be and (in many cases) are, wardens, or at least the trustees within a social whole, should not blind us to the extent to which they, too, are governed by the rules of gender.

The direction that this argument has thus far taken demands that we make a necessary detour into the theory of gender or feminism before we examine the

contents of the anthology that we earlier mentioned. Carole Boyce-Davies (1994:39) has the following to say about the imperative for theory in academic discourse such as the one in session here:

Demands for theoretical declaration work as positioning, locating or containing strategies in line with the ordering and categorizing that is endemic in academic communities... (theory gives) a particular form of insight, distanced and 'penetrating'.

In the next section we therefore now turn our attention to the theoretical underpinnings of this chapter.

### **The feminist theoretical framework**

The feminist theoretical framework enriches our discussion in quite a significant manner. It fundamentally forms the 'objective' apparatus with which to interpret and evaluate the creations of various poets.

Underlying what has been said so far are specific assumptions regarding men/women relationships in society with regards to power. Power is here assumed to be the ability to effectively influence the course of events in human organization. One who wields power has the ability to oppress, ameliorate or stunt the social development of an individual or groups of individuals. With regards to gender, the most basic argument has been that men wield social power and patriarchal society has therefore been constructed to serve the interests of patriarchs at the expense of 'matriarchs'. The perceived monopoly of power by men represents the most fundamental bone of contention, the basis of which feminists such as Jayawardena (1986:ix) are presented with a platform on which to reiterate: 'those who want to continue to keep women...in a position of subordination find it convenient to dismiss feminism as a foreign ideology...' It is this same well-known accusation that must have moved a 'sworn' patriarch, Chief Mkanganwi (in Emmanuel Chiwome et al, 1998:10) to sarcastically comment thus, 'Experts from other cultures have told us that our women are downtrodden'. Mohanty (2003:23) summarizes the negative views about women as follows:

[W]omen are defined as victims of male violence:...as universal dependants;...victims of the colonial process;...victims of Arab familial system...and finally as victims of the economic development process.

Given such a background, feminism therefore (re)presents a postmodern apparatus whose ultimate goal is to deconstruct society and exorcise it of its patriarchal villainy in such a manner that power is brokered and ideally shared equally among the 'patriarchs' and the 'matriarchs'. Feminism is thus hailed as a liberating paradigm whose design is to translocate women from the periphery to the core of social influence and justice. This is the point that Mohanty (*ibid*: 1) makes when she declares, 'It is based on a deep belief in the power and significance of feminist thinking in struggles for economic and social justice'. This by itself begs the question: what really then is feminism, what then is gender?

Jane Flax (in Clark et. al, 1979:73) puzzles over the agenda of gender with such brilliant poignancy that probes to light the problematics of a feminist ontology:

[A]mong feminist theorists there is by no means consensus on such (apparently) elementary questions as: What is gender? How is it related to sexual anatomical differences? How are gender relationships constituted and sustained (in one person's lifetime and more generally as a social experience over time?) How do gender relations relate to other sorts of social relations such as class or race? Do gender relations have a history (or many)? What causes gender relations to change over time? What are the relationships between gender relations, sexuality, and a sense of individual identity? What are the relationships between heterosexuality, homosexuality and gender relations? Could/would gender relations wither away in egalitarian societies? Is there anything that is distinctly male or female in modes of thought and social relations? If there is, are these distinctions innate and/or socially constituted? Are gender distinctions socially useful and/or necessary? If so, what are the consequences for the feminist goal of attaining gender justice?

The candid questions raised here can explicate why, according to Flax, the feminist theory is not a unified or homogenous discourse. In our encounter with a modest corpus of literature on gender, there has not been a single serious discussion that has, one way or the other, ever been situated completely outside the totality of questions raised above. In fact, the major problem is that rarely

are these questions adequately addressed by both feminist theorists and writers of fiction, hence the problematics of a feminist ontology. (Flax, *ibid*:72)

In the meantime, itinerant feminist formations have over the years produced a variety of adherents, both male<sup>4</sup> and female. These sometimes antagonistic variations that are arched by the broad term, feminism, are not always easy to fully unravel. However, one is tempted to think that movements vary with the kinds of questions that they elect to address. The corollary to this is that movements differ in terms of the questions that they each choose not to address. Laments bell hooks (1995:62), regarding the feminism of some black 'sisters':

[M]ore black women are just beginning to embrace narrow notions of feminism (i.e., the idea of woman as victim, man as oppressor/enemy) long after these ideas have been challenged by revolutionary feminist thinking which is more concerned with understanding how sexist oppression are perpetuated and maintained by all of us, not just men. While male domination continues to be a serious problem, it can never be the sole focus of feminist movement.

This strand of feminism that is accommodative and/or sympathetic of men as special victims alongside women is certainly incongruous with that espoused by Weigel (in Wilentz Gay, 1992:388), which sees such an unfair chasm between 'women's importance in producing and reproducing material and social life on one hand, and women's marginal cultural position on the other.' This observation moves her to comment: 'Exclusion from male culture produces/exposes a female culture which has been *suppressed, ignored, distorted*<sup>5</sup> – but not destroyed.' It is apparent that the verbs used; *suppress, ignore* and *distort* all have subjects and objects as part of their lexical formations. The meaning inferable from the use of these predicates is that men are perceived as subjects that volitionally perform the negative actions upon women - their objects. For feminists such as Wilentz Gay (*ibid*), men are decidedly part of the problem and certainly therefore not the solution.

To throw men overboard seems to have left many a black feminist such as bell hooks (1995), and those other sisters in the Diaspora in an excruciating quandary. Describing in a disdainful tone the quandary in which this brand of feminists find themselves 'trapped', Carole Boyce-Davies (1994:8) says:

For it is the additional identity of femaleness which interferes with the seamless Black identity and is therefore either ignored, erased or "spoken for". One still finds women trying to say that they want to speak only as an African or as a "Black" and not as a woman.

This leads us to ask the question that relates directly to the responsibility of the feminist or womanist writer, which we turn to in the next section.

### **The responsibility of the feminist writer**

The discussion has made it implicitly obvious that a feminist writer is tasked with a special responsibility, part of which was spelt out earlier on when mention was made of Dangarembga's declaration that women write about things that move them and also from the consciousness of being women (in Carole Boyce-Davies, 1995:29). However, Jane Flax's (1993:73) nagging question, 'Is there anything that is distinctly male or female in modes of thought and social relations?' requires a categorical answer. Brown (in Wilentz Gay, 1992:389) indicates that African women 'emphasize that the experience, identity and role of a woman are all distinguishable from a man's, in culturally definable terms'. What Brown asserts answers perhaps the second part of Flax's question and certainly not the first.

Most of the answers to the above question that has become the basis of our understanding of the male/female dichotomy are sociological in their import. Wiegel (in Wilentz Gay, ibid:338) sees black women writers (African and African-American/Caribbean) as being preoccupied with the literature of 'generational continuity'. This is a literature whose major aim is to pass on cultural heritage to future generations. This approach finds expression in the pronouncement by Stoeltje (in Gay ibid:389), who views black feminist writers' responsibility as 'to look back through our mothers'. This 'looking back' is what she believes forms the 'basis for the commonalities between all women of African descent'.

Apart from transmitting cultural heritage, Gay (ibid:389) views the responsibility of the women writer as being the voice of other voiceless and disadvantaged women:  
[T]heir [African women writers] work gives utterance to the formerly voiceless members of their communities – the wife, the barren woman,

the young child, the mother, the grandchild, the grandmother, the women friends, female ancestors.

We note with interest that almost all the categories of women that Gay refers to are definable, one way or the other, through the active participation of men in their lives. The basis of the feminist problematic as articulated in this chapter, lies in this recurrent failure at every turn to put men and women asunder. From what has just been said here, there is certainly a man who looms large in the life of a wife, a barren woman, a mother and a grandmother. Armed with this evidence, one is destined to arrive at the conclusion that the ontology of men and women is in essence so inextricably intertwined as to frustrate those who seek to separate it beyond the threshold of that which is reasonable.

The responsibility of the feminist writer has also been seen as one of creative theorizing. Carole Boyce-Davies' (1994) discussion of Ama Ata Aidoo's play *Anowa* is an example of creative theorizing. The eponymous Anowa behaves in a manner that is supposed to kick the reader, or since it is a play, the audience, out of their patriarchal blinkers. Narrates Davies (*ibid*: 60):

Anowa resists all prescriptions concerning modes of behaviour befitting her husband's status and does not partake in his riches – She therefore comes across to those around her as a mad woman.

Anowa is here portrayed as a woman who goes against 'prescriptions' of what is appropriately female as expressed by her parents. Such a character represents women's freedom from the dictates of patriarchal canonicity. It epitomizes creative theorizing. Women writers are thus being urged to create stories that shock people out of their 'narrow', gendered cocoons - even if the cost is to crank up awkward and positively rebellious female 'models' who, in the case of Anowa, disobeys even her own parents in complete travesty of cultural norms and conventions.

It is clear that feminism is a multi-faceted ideology whose internal dynamics do not allow it to come out as a homogenous entity. It is, however, without much doubt that the theory is propelled by what is perceived to be an unfair balance of power between males and females in society. Revolutionary feminism sees this unfair state of affairs as an opportunity to straighten the crooked ways in human affairs by reflecting and exposing them for what they are as a way through which social justice may be achieved. It is against the

background of what has been discussed above that we now examine the thematic concerns of poems in *Ngatisimuke*.

### ***Ngatisimuke* and the feminist project**

The general import of the anthology, *Ngatisimuke*, is that it is written against the background of two fundamental dimensions that intersect in complex ways. The first and most significant one is concerned with the cultural milieu of the poets as Zimbabwean women. The second and equally important plane relates to feminism and gender consciousness under whose ambit the anthology in question was produced. Of these two dimensions, the latter has already received ample coverage. For that reason, we shall only examine the cultural ethos of Zimbabwean women in general following on the logic that the same poets are Zimbabwean women, first and foremost.

It is important to examine the cultural milieu of Zimbabwean women because their literary productions are expressible within that specific cultural perspective. It is imperative to understand a writer's cultural environment because feminism is only but an ideology and not a culture. For this reason, no feminist can therefore operate in a cultural vacuum. Wiegel (in Gay, Wilentz, 1992:388) refers to an abstract female culture which she says has an '...emphasis on the relationship of the individual to her community, to the past, and to the future generations'. Regarding women's literature, Wiegel sees a strong affinity between women writers and their 'cultural heritage'. This point is given credence to by Flax (in Clark et al, 1979:74) when she observes thus:

Through gender relations two types of persons are created: men and women...The actual content of being a man or a woman and the rigidity of the categories themselves are highly variable across cultures and time.

From this, what emerges quite clearly is that gender loyalties are to a great extent subordinated to one's cultural heritage. Feminist or gender consciousness can only therefore be operational in the context of a specific cultural paradigm. Its transcendental legitimacy lies in the participation of women, who, on average, cross-culturally relate to men in specifiable and predictable ways. It is arguable that if pushed any further beyond this threshold the ideology runs the risk of erroneously making one-size-fit-all feminist straightjacket claims. It is on this score that claims to a unified feminist ontology start to totter under the weight

of sometimes conflicting global cultural heritages. It is also at this junction that militant feminist movements start to sacrifice their credibility. This is the problem that Mukhopadhyay (in Sweetman, 1995:15) voices when she writes 'The fear that we may be imposing our own cultural values by insisting on promoting gender equity...is a real one'.

Coming back to the specific circumstances of Zimbabwe, the cultural forces that shape Zimbabwean writers are traceable back to the period when the country was violently subjected to colonial rule by the British. Large swathes of land were parceled out as spoils of war to white soldiers of fortune whose commander-in-chief was Cecil John Rhodes. The unprecedented violence culminated in the now famous *Chimurenga/Umvukela* uprisings of 1896/1897 by African people. The resultant defeat of both the Shona and the Ndebele would seal their fate for almost close to a century to come. Following hard on the heels of this defeat, colonization firmly entrenched itself and the introduction of the cash economy led to the distortion of the people's cultural heritage. The mere hand of fate, however, would not allow the total annihilation of indigenous cultures under the unrelenting hammer strokes of colonialism.

While certain fine points, elements, emphases and focuses might have shifted over the many years of the colonial onslaught, it remains true to this day that Zimbabwean women (and men) still find social security and dignity in marriage. For the overwhelming majority of people, (heterosexual) marriage remains a highly respected social unit and procreation is its *sine quanon*. Homely and domestic space is decidedly the woman's, particularly her kitchen. Women also take a leading role in child rearing, in looking after their husbands and in-laws, caring for sick relatives, working the fields to produce food and doing other domestic chores. For this reason, many poems praise the role of women in the family and the refrain that *musha mukadzi* (the home is a woman) rings with a celebratory frequency in the anthology *Ngatisimuke*<sup>6</sup>.

With 'modernity', women have also taken up professions such as teaching, nursing, secretarial services and to some extent, the uniformed forces. Enterprising Zimbabwean women are also clogged in the informal sector where they are into cross-border merchandizing. Many women also work as shop assistants, beauty salon technicians, house maids and farm labourers. From then on, the number of women who work in modern professions that traditionally seem to have been a male enclave significantly begins to patter out to such an extent that the local media is often at pains to draw the public's attention with its news headlines on the *first woman bus driver*, *the first woman commercial*

*air pilot, the first woman Air Force pilot, the first woman physician, the first woman Vice President, etc.* It is the general expectation of members of the Zimbabwean society that no matter how educated; no matter how ‘professional’ a woman or a man may become, they must still marry and, in the institution of marriage, the woman is expected to subordinate herself to her husband even if she is a company executive and her husband is a mere general hand, hypothetically, employed by the same concern that she heads.

Without going into detail about the rural and urban dichotomy as it relates to women, suffice it to point out that rural women are generally burdened with more physical work as opposed to their urban counterparts. Rural women would be much poorer in comparison and they would scoff at some of the needs of their urban ‘sisters’. Urban women would in general be more educated, more conversant with women’s rights issues, inheritance laws, writing of affidavits and suchlike.

However, it is a fact that the vast majority of urban women have ample rural experience since most of them originate from the same. Both women interact as relatives, as in-laws, as short-term trainees in non-governmental organization projects such as home-based care projects and so forth. Both rural and urban women also often meet during family or clan bereavements that have become too frequent due to HIV/AIDS related deaths. Moreover, both rural and urban women together with their male counterparts share in the same belief system that encompasses taboos, life after death, the existence of the Supreme Being, spirit possession, casting of spells, charms and the constant interaction between physical and terrestrial beings and the overall superiority of the supernatural over the natural.

With regards to power, it is true that in traditional Shona culture, women could not become rulers and this has often been misconstrued to mean that women were therefore objects of masculine dominance. In modern western democracies, drawing a similar conclusion based upon the absence of a female head of government or state would be dismissed as a misleading oversimplification of reality. In monarchical Europe for instance, political power was concentrated in the hands of royalty and not even the most physically strong man could ever hope to rule (except through perhaps a successful usurpation of power). The strongest man was still a nonentity in comparison to a yet-to-be-born princess. Power remains a negotiated commodity and different cultures have evolved ways in which it is shared, used or abused. Power certainly does not always operate in an obvious linear fashion. This, in part

explains the intrigues associated with different rulers' courts that are well recorded in annals of history. Once this point has been accepted, it would be easier to understand that Shona women have, throughout history, shared political power with their men. But certainly not with fanfare and pageantry like is the case in the exercise of exhibitionist linear power. The dictum that 'behind every successful man there is a woman' would in a generalized sense equally apply to the Shona as well. The behind-the-scenes power of women that we refer to here is also described by Joseph (in Clark, *et al*, 1979:213) as follows:

The notion of a monolithic masculine dominance and feminine subjugation has been somewhat modified by recent studies of women's ability to influence male decisions, 'a power behind the throne' theory...

The point of what has been said above is that it will become quite obvious that most of the issues raised by Zimbabwean women will relate in different ways to the brief cultural milieu that has been sketched above. One hardly comes across anything incriminatingly feminist in the poems. If anything, one is more inclined to broadly categorize the poems as *humanist* first and foremost, and *womanist* second. By humanist, we refer to thematic concerns or issues that relate to the commonality of a shared human condition and experience. Such issues would not be gender specific but would broadly touch on the joys and sorrows of people and are invariably operational within a definable cultural ethos. The womanist aspect would broadly be defined as relating to woman in a pre-feministic and/or non-feministic sense of the notion. The unmistakable differentiation between women and men is given credence to by Jane Flax (in Clark, *ibid*:83):

Even some feminists sometimes say that women reason and/or write differently and have different interests and motives than men.

Taking a cue from the above, we submit that issues that almost exclusively relate to womanism comprise mothering, romantic love, receiving and giving lessons for living, hard work, holding the home and family together, caring for the sick, caring for the disadvantaged and feeding members of the household. It is our observation that poems in the anthology in question hardly ever veer too far off these broad categories for any sustainable length of time. As will

become evident in the ensuing paragraphs, the said paradigms; humanism and womanism form the central pillars to which all the other issues are tethered.

## Womanist/Humanist poetry

As earlier indicated, womanist poetry is concerned with issues that directly relate to women as one of the major pillars of society. A cursory look through *Ngatisimuke* soon attracts the reader's attention to the close relationship that cement women to the family. This operational chain of causation can hypothetically be entered from any point; be it courtship, marriage, children or the family itself but our thesis is that all the issues are plotted on the same circular continuum.

The womanist poetry in the anthology clearly celebrates, muses over, laments, rejects, accepts, exhorts, regrets, looks forward to, rejoices, cautions and performs a dozen and half other functions, but they all broadly relate to the family (or its other operational counterparts referred to in the above paragraph). The women's experiences as mediated and viewed through the lenses of their culture is what then gives expression to their poetry. A sober, non-contrived feminist ontology is not easily discernible in the available poems, if at all.

To illustrate our point is the mixed bag of poems that both celebrate as well as decry issues that directly impinge upon the family, at least from the view point of women: 'Madzimai' (Mothers/Women), 'Musha mukadzi' (A woman is the pillar of the family), 'Svinura mwanasikana' (Wake up girl/woman), 'Amai' (Mother), 'Ndaizivei?' (Did I anticipate a thing?), 'Ndiri parumananzombe' (I am in a fix), 'Kuzvipembedza' (Boasting), 'Mudzimai wemupfumi' (Richman's wife), 'Rushusho' (Nagging) and 'Kuranga mhuri' (Family discipline). With regards to the celebratory mood, the poets often see women as playing the singular most significant role in holding the family together. L. Mushambi in 'Amai' (Mother) epitomizes this as follows:

Amai hapana chakakosha kupinda imi mai.

Amai ruva rinoshongedza musha,

Hapana chakakosha kupinda imi amai,

Amai kuti inzi imba ndimi amai (31).

Mother, nothing surpasses your importance, mother.

Mother is the flower that decorates the home,  
Nothing surpasses a mother's worth,  
Mother, for a family to be called one it is because of you mother.

Thus, in this poem and many others written in a similar vein, the women/mother figure is almost selfishly and unilaterally celebrated as the singular defining component of the family unit. But before long into this jubilant festivity, as fate would have it, the vicissitudes of life soon put everything in check as is evident in Maureen Mataranyika's lamentations:

Paakatanga kundirova nekundishusha,  
Nokundinyadzisa nekundifumura kuvanhu  
Vanhu voti, rinonyenga rinostrarara  
Rinosumudza musoro rawana  
Ndaizivei kuti ndokuparara kwemba yangu (39).

When he then started beating me up,  
Putting me to shame in public  
The elders cautioned, he who seeks your hand  
Holds his head low and only rears it after marriage  
Little did I realize that this spelt doom to my home.

Regarding this down side of marriage, most poets view men as being deceitful by showing love only during courtship and the earlier stages of marriage. From that stage on, not a few women poets voice serious regrets. This is the case again in Mataranyika's 'Ndaizivei' and 'Ruchapisa' (When it [love] was still hot), Motsi's 'Dai ndiri murume' (If I were a man), 'Rushusho' and an anonymous poem titled 'Ndidi parumananzombe'. All these poets and others in the anthology are unanimous with regards to this particular complaint. They attribute men's unfaithfulness to lust and do not seem to condemn with equal measure the women that participate in these lust-driven liaisons. Pelda Hove in 'Ruchiva' (Lust) is happy to pass the blame on lust and neither on the men nor the women who partner to quench this lust together:

Ndiwe muvengi woupenyu  
Watadzisa dzimba kumira...  
Mangwana nzve-e kuchirikadzi yavaridzi

Fume toro kukabunha kari apo  
Imomo mumba nomwana wave mukadzi  
Haiwa ruchiwa, denda risina gona.  
.....  
Wakonzero mumwe wangu kudzvokorana naSekai  
Fume mangwana ndaparikwa (45)

You are the of enemy life  
You have destabilized families...  
The other day you sneaked to the widow  
The day after you ran to a little girl  
Right in the home, the daughter is turned to wife  
I give up on lust, a disease without cure.  
.....  
You caused my partner/husband to stare lustfully at Sekai  
And the following day I found myself in a polygamous marriage.

There is no doubt that these poets, in keeping with the expectations of Shona culture, hold the family institution in very high esteem. Most of the problems they take issues with are those that pose a direct threat to the welfare of the family. Such problems comprise extra-marital liaisons, incest, rape, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, domestic violence and the perceived lack of genuine love by husbands/men towards their spouses. To this end, we have poets who even impersonate<sup>7</sup> their gender by writing in the voice of an idealized, truly loving man and/or husband, such as Eplin Mutemeru in 'Ndaikuda mudiwa' (I loved you darling) and Evelyn Bipiri in 'Shamiso mudiwa' (Shamiso my darling). This rare impersonation is perhaps devised to provide men with a first hand account of what women require both in courtship and marriage.

As earlier stated, the point of this exposition is to use poems in the anthology in question to access the consciousness of women poets. We could go on in the same vein to illustrate other thematic preoccupations that fall under what we have termed womanist poems. Suffice it to point out that some of the unmistakable concerns that women raise with something akin to missionary zeal relate to the girl child. They are certainly at pains to warn her regarding the problems associated with premarital sex (cf. 'Ndambakuudzwa' [The-I-Don't-Listen-To-Noone], 'Mhandara' [Marriageable girl], 'Wabva zera' [You have come of age] and 'Svinura mwanasikana' [Wake up girl child]). Some

poems also encourage women in general to acquire an education while others talk about women's rights issues. Education is generally regarded as a vehicle for vertical social mobility in Zimbabwe, hence the concerted encouragement.

In 'Ndodzungaira' (I am suffering), Keresia Chateuka is particularly strongest in her condemnation of marital rape. She categorically declares that she will shout for 'Women's Freedom!' without ceasing. To this extent alone, we are inclined to view Chateuka<sup>8</sup> as being the odd one out vis-à-vis the majority of the other poets. The issue of marital rape that she raises is anachronistic to Shona culture and tradition. Put simply, there is no such thing as marital rape in the Shona penal code<sup>9</sup>. The understanding is that no reasonable marriage partner can deny the other party their conjugal rights unless for weighty reasons. Members of the Shona patriarchal league would rush to conclude that ideas like 'marital rape' were implanted into local women's psyche by mischievous feminist agents or some such miscreants whose attitude towards marriage is consonant with the saying, 'Grapes are sour.' The indignant rebuttal from feminists is anticipated but such are the hallmarks of healthy debates.

On the basis of what has already been discussed above, we shall therefore have relatively less to discuss regarding what we have labeled humanist poetry. It will be recalled from earlier discussion that humanist writing grapples with issues that, from the point of view of this chapter, are both non-feminist and gender-neutral. If we were to refer to sex, we would say that humanist writing is asexual. And, if we were to use the analogy of sets, in which men and women belong to two different sets, we would say that humanist issues are those that belong to the common or intersection set. Such issues would be ones that deal with the community of humans who ordinarily share the same cultural and geographical space.

Humanist poems come in all sorts of sheds and guises. There are poems that relate to the politics of the country (cf. 'Chokwadi ndiwe here Zimbabwe?', [Is that really you, Zimbabwe?], 'Kuda umambo' [Craving for power/chieftainship], 'Dama rangu ndiwe' [You are my mouthpiece], 'Mununuri' [Savior]); drought (cf. 'Nzara yegore reESAP 1992' [Drought during the 1992 ESAP], 'Makanganwa here?' [Have you forgotten?], 'Mununuri' [Savior], 'Chamangwiza' [The champion]); the plight of orphans (cf. 'Uterera' [Orphahood], 'Nherera' [Orphan], 'Todii nherera?' [What shall we orphans do?], 'Chengetai' [Look after them<sup>10</sup>])); and a host of other mundane questions that are the stock-in-trade of community living. It adds nothing to our argument to get into those and we shall for that reason not go any further into that enterprise.

## Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has examined a handful of complex matters that relate to gender and women's literature in Zimbabwe. We theorized as well as characterized gender in general with a view to determining the extent to which the poems in Zimbabwe Women Writers anthology are feminist. In order to do justice to the contents of the anthology we found it imperative to discuss some relevant background matters such as gender and feminism that were requisite to better appreciate the poetry. It was found out that there exists no single definition of feminism that can be accepted by all the theorists in the discipline and for that reason, it emerged that there are disagreements and different schools of thought that fall under the same broad ideology of feminism and/or gender. However, it is unarguable that at the end of the day, feminism is concerned with women's liberation from what is perceived to be men's hurting domination over women. The agenda of feminism seems to be a global revolution whose design is to achieve equality between men and women using a multi-pronged approach that encompasses literature, lobbying, activism, theatre, magazines, newsletters and other forms of information dissemination.

The major question has been to find out whether or not there is a separate worldview or ontology that is a special preserve of women. An analysis of this complex question led us to the conclusion that women definitely have specific issues, separate from those of men that are, however, ultimately realizable only in the context of their society and culture. Women (or men) do not, however, own a secluded enclave that is separate from and independent of their respective cultures. It was argued then that issues pertaining to gender or feminism would be subordinated to one's ontology and not vice versa. Feminism is an itinerant free agent of no fixed abode and can only meaningfully be addressed in the context of a specific cultural milieu. On this realization, it became imperative to examine the cultural milieu within which Zimbabwe Women Writers draw their inspiration as well as operate. A search for that led us to an adumbration of the historical milieu that shape Zimbabwean women's worldview. Zimbabwean women's worldview as gleaned from *Ngatisimuke* is heavily influenced by the cultural-political history of colonization and subsequent independence more than anything else.

A closer look at the poems showed that they straddle two closely related sub-genres, womanism and humanism. It is quite obvious that women are overwhelmingly preoccupied with issues relating to the family. The family

as an operational term broadly encompasses many matters that are directly or obliquely related to it, such as courtship, romantic love, marriage, children, the HIV/AIDS scourge, the problem of orphans and a variegation of other related issues. Women celebrate their role as mothers and they boastfully equate themselves with the family itself. They however lament the unfaithfulness of men, but they do not quite strongly condemn other women who snatch their men. A negligibly tiny number of poems refer to issues that would fall under the feminist rubric but even then, poems such as Chateuka's 'Ndodzungaira' seem to have a contrived ring to them for their shrill crescendo for women's rights advocacy, let alone for her anachronistic charge of marital rape against men. One is inclined to view her poetry as being spiced with a heavily sponsored feminist input that views poetry as an end in itself and not vice versa.

Apart from that, the rest of the poems do not in any way betray the gender of the individuals who wrote them. We have conveniently characterized such poems as humanistic in as far as they are concerned with experiences that impact upon the human condition without making necessary reference to the primordial categories of male and female. Under this category, women poeticize on issues such as hunger, droughts, their country, their president, the land. The heavy cultural-political history comes across unmistakably. For this reason, we are wont to say that women are humans first and women second.

In conclusion, the ontology of both men and women is intertwined in such an intricate fashion that it is hard to disentangle. Both categories' worldview cannot exist outside their societies and cultures. Power and dominance are not unidirectional formations and they seem not to conform to whether or not one is male or female. There are known females who, in terms of power and influence, very few men can ever match. Equally, there are many men who not many females can ever hope to match with regards to the power and influence at their command. This observation applies both at the family/clan levels as well as the national and even global levels. We here assume that there are a legion of complex intersecting variables that simultaneously come into play in the lives of human beings. The recognition and close study of such intersecting variables should help humanity better understand the internal dynamics of human organization in general and gender in particular.

## Endnotes

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thanks to Dr Furusa of California State University, Dominguez Hills for his material and moral support in hosting me as well as providing most of the reading material for this work.

<sup>2</sup> This title translates into English as follows: *Let us Stand Up: The Sweetness of Poetry*. On the cover page of the same anthology, it is clearly indicated; *POEMS chosen from the writings of members of Zimbabwe Womens Writers*.

<sup>3</sup> Zimbabwe Women Writers (ZWW) is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) that was founded in 1990 and it holds writing workshops as well as publish literature that is produced by women. We take it that any work that exclusively purports to encourage and support women's writing cannot fail to be feminist in the very least sense of the term.

<sup>4</sup> Speaking about male converts to feminism, hooks (1995:64-65) voices her skepticism of them as follows: 'While black male academics and intellectuals give lip service to a critique of sexism... (...often to advance their careers – any black male who speaks on behalf of ending sexism appears unique, special), rarely do they change their habits in professional and private life in ways that testify to the repudiation of patriarchy or sexist habits of thinking of being'.

<sup>5</sup> The italics have been inserted for emphasis and they are the present writer's.

<sup>6</sup> (cf. poems; 'Madzimai' (Women) p 23; 'Musha mukadzi' (A woman is the pillar of the home) p 24; 'Svinura mwanaasikana' (Wake up girlchild/woman) p 29; 'Amai' (Mother) p 31; 'Kushaya mbereko' (Barrenness) pp 66-67; 'Kuzvipembedza' (Boasting) pp 68-67).

<sup>7</sup> In Western literary traditions, such poetry would perhaps be viewed as pressure realized from a socially or psychologically suppressed lesbian proclivity. We would however vehemently disagree with that slant of analysis.

<sup>8</sup> While running the risk of being seen as prejudiced against the women's liberation movement, I frankly observe that Chateuka's poem has a theatrical shrill cry for freedom to it that strikes one as overshooting the call of duty as a writer. She sounds like one desperate to meet the requirements of some generous publication sponsor.

<sup>9</sup> While there might be marital rape in the western sense of the concept, Chateuka's mention of it in Shona society sounds like one who has been successfully drilled in the requirements of her literary sponsors.

<sup>10</sup> The pronoun 'them' is referring to orphans.

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Rosemary Moyana

## Introduction

There are very few Shona women novelists, the most prolific being Sharai Mukonoweshuro. Readers would be keen to find out what these few writers focus on. This chapter closely examines how some Shona female authors deal with issues confronting women and how the female characters emerge. The five novels that are discussed in this chapter all deal with specific social issues that women find challenging. Kahari is correct in calling women's novel writing, 'a rebellion of the intellect', as women started writing 'about the abuses they suffered and saw around them' (Kahari, 1997:343). These abuses are well articulated in *Zviuya Zviri Mberi* (1974), *Akafuratidzwa Mwoyo* (1983), *Makudo Ndomamwe* (2004) and *Ndakagara Ndazviona* (1995). Events unfold differently in *Richave Dzerevende* (1998).

The Shona novel by women can basically be understood from a Marxist/Engelian point of view which enables us to understand the characters' need to satisfy material life, 'for life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing and various other things' (Marx and Engels, 1976:47). In various ways, the authors manage to convey this concept in their works. As Marx and Engels point out, 'the first historical act [of man/woman] is...the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself' (*ibid*: 47).

In exploring this basic issue of the provision of material life, the female Shona novelists engage in sexual politics, exploring 'the social inequality between women and men', with men and women attempting to, and sometimes succeeding in profiteering from women, young and/or old (MacKinnon, 1991:ix). The most disturbing aspect of this profiteering and exploitation of women is that it is not only carried out by men against women, but also frequently by women against each other. Sometimes women are actually much more vicious adversaries of fellow women. We find an explanation for this attitude in the same need to satisfy material life because invariably, this exploitation is done in order to alleviate poverty at a personal level. However, in all cases in the novels that are analyzed here, women's sexuality is central to men's status. To this end, men and their female accomplices wield

institutional power over weaker females who are usually the victims. We now analyse how male-female or gender issues are enacted in the novels. We shall also attempt to work out the authors' vision in each novel.

We must hasten to declare early in the discussion, that the societies created by the novelists are not always representative of the traditional African societies in real life. Zulu Sofola (in Nnaemeka, Obioma, 1998:54) asserts that,

The worldview of the African is rooted in a philosophy of holistic harmony and communalism rather than in the individualistic isolationism characteristic of European thought. The principle of relatedness is the *sine qua non* of African social reality. Relatedness characterizes the African experience of the living person. If one is cut off from his community, one is considered dead...the individual belongs primarily to a context, and within it he/she moves and has his/her being. It is this philosophy that informs African social order and the dual-sex system of socio-political organization which Kamene Okonjo articulated as follows:

The African woman has not been inactive, irrelevant and silent. Rather, African tradition has seen the wisdom of a healthy social organization where all its citizens are seen to be vital channels for a healthy and harmonious society. Hence the establishment of a dual-sex power structure, which is lacking in European and Arab cultures.

It is important to bear this in mind because often the characters in the novels do not always display such African values. We shall discuss the values in those novels as they arise, but always remembering that they do not necessarily portray real life traditional African values.

Before we get to the novels, it is important to define 'gender'. Easthorpe (1986:2-3) has defined it in three ways: 'as the body; as our social roles of male and female; as the way we internalize [sic] and live out these roles'. For Bressler (1999:270),

Gender studies broaden traditional feminist criticism to include an investigation not only of femaleness but also maleness. What does it mean, it asks, to be a woman or a man? Gender studies continue to

investigate how women and men view such terms as *ethics*, definitions of truth, personal identity, and society.

The two definitions provide a comprehensive way of understanding gender in the works under study. In fact, in her discussion of Marxism and Feminism, MacKinnon (1991:3) makes an observation, which is pertinent and applicable to our novels:

Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away...As work is to Marxism, sexuality to feminism is socially constructed yet constructing, universal as activity yet historically specific, jointly comprised of matter and mind.

We shall find that women's sexuality is often 'taken away' from them, and it becomes the cause of their misfortune. Only one novel, Joyce Simango's *Zviuya Zviri Mberi*, seems to succeed in defying the grip that patriarchy has on female sexuality. Let us now turn our attention to that pioneering work.

### ***Zviuya Zviri Mberi***

Joyce Simango's *Zviuya Zviri Mberi*, which can be translated to mean, 'The best is yet to come', or to be literal, 'The good things are ahead', as Kahari (1997:143) suggests, explores some of the complicated social issues women writers deal with. This is the story of VaMunhamo, her two children, Tambudzai and Chemwandoita, and VaNhamoinesu, her husband. Chemwandoita, the boy, experiences no significant controversy in the story. The story centers on Tambudzai, the nine-year old daughter whose father wants to marry off to Mundogara, a polygamous man said to be old enough to be Tambudzai's grandfather. He already has five wives, just like Tambudzai's father. It is the fifth wife's *lobola* (bridewealth) that needs to be secured through Tambudzai's marriage to Mundogara. The latter had already given VaNhamoinesu, the money to marry that fifth wife. VaNhamoinesu now just has to deliver and honor his side of the bargain in order to seal the deal.

Thus, Tambudzai, at this tender age, already has no control over her sexuality. For the men in this novel, to acquire many wives is a symbol of status that brings fame and a fulfilment of their concept of manhood, power and wealth. A study of this novel, therefore, becomes an investigation into what femaleness

and maleness mean, as Bressler asks (*ibid*: 270): ‘What does it mean...to be a woman or a man?’

The short answer to the question is that to be a woman in VaNhamoinesu’s compound is to be a commodity and a nonentity, and to be a man is to be the owner of that commodity. For example, VaNhamoinesu does not care about the well being of his wives. The narrator informs us, *Vakanga vasina hanya nokurwara kwavakadzi vavo* (He did not care about the well being of his wives) (11). Yet, he values women’s sexuality as evident in his efforts to pursue VaMunhamo when she runs away with Tambudzai. His instruction to Pirai whom he sends to look for this truant wife is to bring back his children. He does not care about the wife.

Culturally and traditionally, among most of the older people that populate these novels, a wife is not a companion to her husband. A woman gets married in order to bear children, work in the fields and look after the husband’s family, a fact well articulated in another novel by Pelda Hove, *Richave Dzerevende* (1998). In fact, the objectification of the woman is demonstrated through the fact that it was the families that played matchmaker. As Lydia Janhi (1970:33) explains, long ago, parents chose husbands for their daughters based on the men’s character rather than love between the two. In Ndabaningi Sithole’s *Busi*, serialised in *African Parade and Photo Action* (October, 1959 to January, 1961), a young girl named Busi runs away from home because her father wants to marry her off to an old man so that he may be given some cattle.

In *Zviuya Zviri Mberi*, it is the girl’s mother who decides to defy the above-described custom of *kuputsa mwanasikana*, literally, ‘to break the girl child’. The idea of doing so when the girls are young is to ensure complicity. For example, it is clear in the novel that Tambudzai still has a child’s innocence and does not understand the gravity of the predicament that she is in.

The practice of pledging young girls to men was common, not only in Zimbabwe, but also in other African countries and other parts of the world. It is still prevalent in some parts of the world. Time will eradicate this practice as humanity develops. Perhaps that is why Simango decides to criticize such a tradition in novel form.

Sofola (in Nnaemeka *ibid*:63), however, seems to embrace polygamy, arguing that the husband becomes a shared commodity rather than a central focus as in monogamy. She goes on to say that the more he is shared, the less central he becomes in the wife’s life; the more central the mother/child dynamic becomes. She sees monogamy as an alienating factor in the same way that

western culture alienates the African woman to the point where she neither understands nor appreciates her own, whose tenets include polygamy as an ideal marital set-up.

In Simango's novel, however, VaMunhamo has not acquired an alien culture in the form of western education, but she does run away from home in order to rescue her daughter from a forced marriage into a polygamous home. We can say that she and her daughter are running away from the power of patriarchy. The male force becomes the social force that systematically shapes the social imperatives for the female (MacKinnon, 1991:ix). VaMunhamo defeats such male driven social imperatives. For example, when Mundogara, Tambudzai's potential husband, brings the gift of a hare, she refuses to acknowledge it as a genuine gift. Tambudzai's mother also hates the idea and thinks that it is foolish and arrogant for a man to attempt to bribe her with a little rabbit. Instead, she is determined to rescue her young daughter from the impending forced marriage. In doing so, VaMunhamo is redefining her own parameters and taking control of her own daughter's life, instead of blindly accepting patriarchal control as she sees and defines it, thus defying tradition.

Once she breaks the ties with her husband, VaMunhamo and Tambudzai are like a free ball. Ramatoulaye (in Mariama Ba, 1989:40) argues that a woman is like a ball. Once thrown, no one can predict where it will bounce and no one has control over where it rolls, and even less over who gets it. It is often grabbed by an unexpected hand.

Tambudzai eventually falls into the hands of missionaries who educate her and, like a ball, she rolls into the nursing profession, finally being catapulted into Davy's arms who marries her. By the end of the novel, she is enjoying a very happy life at home and abroad where she, her husband and child, emigrate. Her happiness is a tribute to her mother's determination and later, her own, and that qualifies this novel as a good attempt in the feminist genre. Both women go through a severe test and both pass that test.

For the grown Tambudzai, the endurance test comes when she escapes one old man only to land into the clutches of another, Chairikira, a married man who pays her father's demanded compensation of £25, for the loss of revenue he would have received from Mundogara had she not run away with her mother. Chairikira now wants to marry Tambudzai even though she does not love him. For us to understand the way men in this society think, we have to refer to Hegel (in Simone de Beauvoir, 1989:435) who maintains that women's relations as mother and wife are basically general and not individual.

He further argues that for the woman, it is not a question of *this husband* but of *a husband* in general, of children in general. This is true of Tambudzai's situation where the father and the potential old suitors do not expect her to be particular about who she marries, as long as it is *a man* who would become *a husband* to her.

When her boyfriend, Davy, pays Chairikira's debt, she still has to endure another test, namely, Davy's prolonged absence and the pain brought on by rumours of his alleged marriage to another woman abroad where he has gone for further studies. Here, we can agree with Sofola (in Nnaemeka, 1998:63) when she argues that, because of this 'wifehood' syndrome, the educated African woman spends most of her time panicking over the possibility of rejection by her husband, thus making herself less relevant and less effective. Tambudzai indulges in this syndrome of 'wifehood', even though she is still single. Indeed, many detractors, including Davy's family, persuade her to marry someone else. But she remains resolute and practically becomes a *waiting 'wife'*, as described in Njabulo Ndebele's novel, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2004:2). She is the new Penelope, an ultimate symbol of a wife, 'so loyal and so true', even though she is a mere girlfriend. Ironically, Davy is fraternising with many women, as he tells her later upon his return. Since the man is the one who wields authority, the woman invariably suffers when that waiting has not been done to perfection. The only redeeming factor for Davy is that he apologizes to Tambudzai and marries her.

One underlining factor that appears to dictate terms to fathers who 'break' their daughters is poverty. They are in need of wealth or simply, money, and one of the means of earning that money is by practically 'selling' their young daughters. Thus, as Odora, 1993:11) puts it:

'capital', over and above male female domination, has itself provided a basis for control and differentiation...that has affected not only women, but also other groups that are compelled to survive in such a context of subjugation.

VaMunhamo mourns such poverty that she feels is a curse. It is important to note that although poverty entraps both males and females, it is the females who bear the brunt as portrayed in this novel. It is VaMunhamo's husband, for instance, who has an advantage and the immediate means to try and alleviate his poverty as compared to his wife. The husband marries off Tambudzai, which VaMunhamo cannot do.

This issue of being pledged to an older man for a husband could even have resulted in Tambudzai being pulled out of school, for in this society's cultural context, the belief is that marriage takes precedence over the acquisition of a western education whose benefits are little known anyway. This aspect is well articulated and dramatized by Tambudzai's nephew, Kuraune, a drunk who lobbies on behalf of Chairikira because he buys him beer. In return, Kuraune urges Tambudzai to forget about school in order to get married to a wealthy man. After all, a woman's duty is to be married and to bear children. This male domination over the female who potentially can empower herself is problematic. Odora has explained its cause as that of 'capital', as quoted earlier. Certainly, as far as Kuraune is concerned, Tambudzai has no right to do what she wants. She should be told what to do by the men in the family, including being told to stop going to school. Whether deliberately or through ignorance, there is a fear of the females' education because it is believed that it will give the girl some undesirable independence. This is why it is correct to view the basis of gender disparity in this and other novels, from the Marxist exposition of the need to satisfy man's basic material needs.

Simango's answer to this cycle of poverty is empowerment for both males and females through western education. So, both VaMunhamo's children get educated at mission schools, Tambudzai becoming a nurse who marries Davy, a teacher, and her brother proceeds to university. Before getting married, Tambudzai gets a job and is able to help her family. She assists Chemwandoita, who is still at university and even manages to pay the required *lobola* to his girlfriend's family. Simango has been successful in balancing male and female joint efforts towards economic emancipation, what Hudson-Weems (in Nnaemeka, 1998:148) calls 'empowerment of women and individualism...human dignity and rights'. For Simango, both sexes have been liberated from stifling tradition and poverty. The oppressive, sexist tradition that is the setting of her novel is replaced by mutual respect between the sexes. Gender issues have therefore been positively portrayed in this novel. *Zviuya Zviri Mberi*, as a title, therefore could mean a heralding of the best times or best, ideal age in the future when exploitation of one sex by another would no longer exist.

Although western education liberates Tambudzai and her family from the clutches of poverty, its alienating nature needs to be noted. While there is no doubt that Tambudzai feels good about her economic and professional achievement, there are negative consequences that are felt as a result of this independence from the embracing, communal, nurturing culture from which

they escape. Sofola (in Nnaemeka, ibid:54) correctly argues that if one is cut off from this nurturing culture, one is considered dead. Thus, no matter how much she misses her father, Tambudzai has been cut off from him and the culture that he believes in, and so she is practically 'dead' to him and to her paternal home and family.

The other four novels discussed below give completely different solutions to similar conflicts.

### ***Akafuratidzwa Mwoyo***

Sharai Mukonoweshuro's *Akafuratidzwa Mwoyo* is a more shocking tale of jealousy. A mother ends up fatally poisoning her own son in order to fix an 'undesirable' daughter-in-law. Gender issues here are more complex because it is the older woman who persecutes the younger woman. Men, in the novel, are gentle, loving and generally very kind and warm, akin to African men in real life who are not always cruel and domineering in a negative sort of way. The evil nature of the mother-in-law, again, can be understood from the Marxist dictum referred to above concerning the need to satisfy material life. When Svinurai, VaMakandionei's son, marries Machivei, he concentrates on his new nucleus family of wife and children. Consequently, VaMakandionei feels neglected materially and emotionally and alleges that because of Machivei, Svinurai no longer cares for her. She therefore attempts to kill his entire family by burning down their house with Machivei and children inside. When they survive that arson, she resorts to fatally poisoning her own son. She accuses Machivei of feeding her son a love potion that has turned his heart away from her. Hence, the novel's title, meaning, 'His heart was turned away [from me, the mother]'.<sup>10</sup>

Using Freudian psychoanalysis, one could interpret the extreme jealousy exhibited by VaMakandionei as being a result of unresolved sexual attachment to her son. She failed to successfully pass through the castration complex or to successfully negotiate the Electra complex in a lop-sided way (Bressler, 1999:152). So in adulthood, she remains more or less physically, emotionally and psychologically attached and attracted to her son. She, therefore, regards her daughter-in-law as a rival. Significantly, her husband is no longer alive. An example of VaMakandionei's bitterness is when she complains to her friend, VaMashizha, that whenever her son visits, he prefers to spend time with his 'proud' wife. VaMakandionei works herself up into a frenzied fury, and the fact that she drinks alcohol continuously does not help

matters. By the time she poisons her son, her mind is full of beer fumes, practically, because she drinks without necessarily eating sensibly.

This novel is firmly rooted in traditionalism, unlike *Zviuya Zviri Mberi*, which has feminist tendencies. Traditionalism manifests itself most in Machivei, a comely, obedient, ideal young wife. She succumbs to extreme submissiveness, both internally and externally. For instance, she suppresses the desire to go and live with her husband in Zvishavane where he teaches. At the same time, both husband and wife suffer from the colonial, capitalist ideology which segregates against African male workers by not allowing them enough living space to accommodate their families at the work place. Endurance, thus, becomes the only thing to live for in Machivei's life. When she consults her aunt on these issues, the aunt advises her not to tell off or answer back when her mother-in-law insults her. It is only after her husband's death that she leaves for Chivi, without two of her children. They do not belong to her, but to the husband's people, as tradition in this novel dictates.

This is a serious aspect of the oppressive conditions dictated by traditionalism as manifested in the novel. It also manifests itself in the definition of marriage - not for companionship with one's partner, but for service to the husband's family. This is why VaMakandionei and her *sahwira* resent Machivei's tete-a-tete with her husband. It is a case of the values of the dominant patriarchal class being internalized by every class (Mohanty, et al, 1991:167). The downtrodden class such as Machivei's, feels more and more inferior and helpless, while the domineering class, here represented by VaMakandionei, feels more assertive in a cruel sort of way. VaMakandionei goes on to influence Soromoni, Svinurai's and Machivei's first son, against his mother, convincing him that it is the mother who killed his father. Soromoni automatically becomes a member of the dominant class, believing his grandmother without even investigating the truth of what he is told. Hence, the mother is further victimized to the point where Soromoni vows to kill her in order to avenge his father's death. Not until a friend's father reveals the truth to him, does he turn against his grandmother who responds by committing suicide.

Machivei, however, does not actively seek to assert her rights in this family. Even when VaMakandionei influences Tagarika, her kind brother, to fire her from his shop; even when her own son, Soromoni, insults and chases her away from his home when she visits, she remains a woman of great dignity and humility. It is Svinurai who declares his deep love for her and who also

expresses his dismay at the arson committed at his house, promising vengeance if and when he catches the culprit. Thus, in the novel, it has been easy to victimize such a meek and humble character. Machivei's sister-in-law, Maidei, is a better character who displays independent thought by contradicting her mother in most of her negative running commentary against Machivei. Yet, even Maidei cannot articulate a definite opposing attitude towards the forces that are suffocating Machivei. Machivei's aunt can only console her and advise her to persevere.

This sort of advice demeans Machivei and it seems to be a misrepresentation of the African traditional, rural woman as viewed by Sofola (in Nnaemeka, ibid:63) when she says,

Quite often when one hears the Western-educated African woman speak in a demeaning manner about her illiterate, rural "traditional" counterpart, one cannot help but pity the former for her false sense of importance and delusion of grandeur. It never occurs to her that while she parrots the phrase, "What a man can do, a woman can do better," her illiterate counterpart asserts: "What a woman can do, a man cannot do..."

Ama Ata Aidoo (in Nnaemeka, ibid:39-49) also discusses the tenacity of the traditional African woman to show that from time immemorial, she has worked hard and fearlessly in order to fend for her family. In this novel the writer seems to promote the concept that women should not be seen to be opinionated about anything at all. The end of the novel vindicates Machivei who regains respect and motherhood for Soromoni, but only because the latter liberates her by confronting his own grandmother and exposing her evil. The writer, thus, creates a world where gender issues are complicated by jealousy rooted in extreme materialism and plain evil. In her other novel, *Ndakagara Ndazviona*, attention shifts to a young girl's handling of love affairs. We shall discuss this novel together with others that deal with the same subject.

### **Three novels, three types of love affairs**

In *Ndakagara Ndazviona*, the plot and theme of love are prominent, with love, education and work outside the home for a young girl explored concurrently. The other two novels where love and education form an integral part of the plot and theme are Pelda Hove's *Richave Dzerevende* and Rudo Makayi's *Makudo*.

*Ndomamwe*. These novels portray young high school girls who become extremely irresponsible in the way they handle their love affairs. In the end, only the girl in *Makudo Ndomamwe* succeeds in getting empowered through education. As discussed earlier, the girls in the other two novels do not succeed in achieving the means to satisfy material life. One gets the impression that they neither understand how education is supposed to transform their lives towards that goal, nor are they rooted in the nurturing of traditional life. So, they remain caught in-between, so to speak. It seems as if school for them is still an extraneous element, relatively isolated from other forms of social life (Odora, 1993:93). This is an interesting point when one considers that Simango, who writes in the 1970s, was better able to articulate decisively the role that education plays in emancipating families from the clutches of poverty. These three more recent works do not address the issue of education in the same manner. It would be interesting to see how these authors approach the complex subjects of love, education and career for the girl child in relation to fulfilling material life. We are mindful of the fact that these girls are now divorced from the warmth of the communal traditional home as discussed by Sofola (in Nnamaeka, ibid:54).

Unlike in the two novels discussed above, we cannot say that the girls in the novels under discussion are forced into their relationships the way Tambudzai is being forced to marry two old men at different times in her life. In *Ndakagara Ndazviona*, for example, the story opens with news from Gurai that her cousin, Revai is pregnant. It turns out that the pregnancy is not by her boyfriend, Jemisi Nzara, but by her aunt's husband, and she claims that 'he forced her'. If this is true, perhaps she could have told someone on the day of the event. Somehow, the text does not follow this claim of the rape convincingly. To keep quiet and seemingly not to even worry about this forced affair leaves the reader sceptical as to whether, indeed, she was a true victim of rape. Instead of her mother protesting and threatening the rapist, she looks forward to her daughter's marriage to VaMhosva, the alleged perpetrator, because he is a wealthy man. Once again, the issue of material needs surfaces.

On her own part, Revai does not seem to understand her fate. We see her not perturbed by the fact that she is going to be a second wife to her own paternal aunt. When Jemisi, her boyfriend, puzzles over her supposed illness of a stomach-ache, Revai's answer is a naive utterance, '*Waiuya kuzodii?*' (What were you coming to do?) (13-15). She neither appreciates nor understands that Jemisi is deeply in love with her and that she has an obligation to explain

matters to him. Throughout this novel, Revai displays no serious emotion towards her boyfriend who is so much in love that he visits her at VaMhosva's home where she is married. His love for her turns fatalistic, however, when he finally murders VaMhosva in order to reclaim his woman.

If, indeed, Revai was raped by VaMhosva, then that could explain her seeming indifference to the sensuous love between her and Jemisi. We can explain her flat attitude in Collins' words:

In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that provide energy for change. The ability of social practices such as pornography, prostitution, and rape to distort the private domain of...women's love relationships...typifies this process (Collin, 2000:171).

Thus, Revai feels so oppressed by both VaMhosva and her mother who encourages her to marry this wealthy man for her own anticipated material gain, that she is unable to reciprocate Jemisi's love, or to respond meaningfully to his enquiries on why her behavior seems to have changed. This is similar to what victims of racism feel when they are sometimes paralyzed into machine-like passiveness. By having VaMhosva murdered, it appears as if the author has supported marriage based on genuine love since Revai ends up resuming her love affair with a man of her own choice.

Although Revai goes back to Jemisi, she still does not show the kind of remorse expected of a woman who engaged in an illicit affair behind her boyfriend's back. Strangely, Jemisi continues to love Revai as if she has always been his own. He, however, hates Revai's son by VaMhosva to such an extent that the reader is afraid for the boy's and even its mother's life. It is this relationship with the boy that gets Jemisi to reveal that he killed VaMhosva in order to demonstrate the depth of his love and commitment to Revai. It takes Revai's friend and neighbor to convince her that Jemisi has genuine love for her.

Revai's affair with VaMhosva terminates her education when she becomes pregnant. She makes no effort to return to school. Although her uncle takes her to Harare so that she can seek employment, she fails to do so and, instead, clandestinely resuscitates her love affair with Jemisi. She is comfortable with the role of a full time housewife and mother.

*Makudo Ndomamwe* subscribes to the idea of western education as a liberating tool, as shown in the case of Revai, the main character in this novel. Revai fails to write her 'O' level examinations because she falls pregnant by a womaniser and a reckless teacher, Gutsa, who deceives her by promising marriage. The girl is naïve and is easily taken advantage of. However, it is her brother, Nyadzisai, who affords her a second chance in life by financing her resumed studies while living with her grandmother, VaMashizha. After passing her 'O' level examinations, she trains as a nurse in Harare.

It is while in Harare that she falls in love with a former schoolmate, Nyengerai. Although he initially means well, just before going overseas for further studies, his relatives discourage him from continuing the affair with Revai whom they perceive to be loose. Meanwhile, by the time he leaves for further studies, Revai is pregnant again out of wedlock.

This woman's only redeeming feature is that she is employed and is financially secure. She seems to be devoted to her career and to motherhood even though these are not emphasized in the story. She is a strong woman who has faced rejection twice, yet without giving up on her career aspirations.

Revai, thus, fits into the category of many black women who want loving sexual relationships with black men, but instead, end up alone. Perhaps for her, wisdom, experience, and some passion become important weapons against male abuse (Collins, 2000:160). Thus, she is able to face Nyengerai later, and reject him in public. She has the courage to face her mistakes, analyze them and is able to conclude that men are all the same - deceitful people as the title, *Makudo Ndomamwe* suggests. She, therefore, pours her energies into motherhood and career, and hopes that her daughter, Chido, would not be as unlucky as she has been with men. In the meantime, she seems to be at peace with herself once she discovers that what she had in herself was a world that men wanted to enter without living in it. They wanted to take it away without owning it, or to lay it waste so that others would have no desire to even take a peep (Ndebele, 2004:57). Once she realizes these things, perhaps, she is able to live with herself without bitterness, and then hope for a better day in future.

Nevertheless, Revai can work out 'where the rain began to beat her', to use Achebe's expression (Chinua Achebe, 1981:44). With two children out of wedlock, both men and women in real life and in the novel brand her, a *mvana*, a dirty word that describes women in her predicament. At least the author ends the novel on a positive note for the women - it is *they* who abandon the arrogant man and in Topics Store, First Street Harare!

In the last novel, *Richave Dzerevende*, we are confronted by a reckless, sexually and morally irresponsible girl, Pendeka, and an equally reckless and morally irresponsible man, Chigariro. Chigariro's irresponsibility is well described at the beginning of the novel and is also depicted and accentuated by jealous, neighboring women who mock his wife. These women are jealous of her because she is a hard worker at home in the communal lands where she farms. She cannot live with her husband in Zvishavane where he works as a manager because she works hard, doing her own thing, to use that modern colloquialism, in order to satisfy requirements for material life. She has her own money and even sends some to her husband who, however, misuses it. The narrator's explanation for her remaining in the rural areas, however, is not so positive or complimentary because she is seen to be a culturally well-socialized woman who understands that wifehood/womanhood means tilling the land, home building, child-bearing and looking after the husband's relatives.

This is a typical misrepresented image of a rural woman that Sofola (1998) talks about as quoted earlier. Here she appears to have been brainwashed and socialized into total humility. Such people as portrayed here define womanhood or femininity in terms of work, home building and procreation. In addition, this wife learns to accept her husband's infidelity as a given fait a compli. Hence, Chigariro is very happy that his wife does not interfere with his activities. He is popular with prostitutes and goes about snaring young women at will.

One such young girl who falls into the clutches of Chigariro's spider's web is Pendeka, his own son Wiridzai's girlfriend. They both use false identities. From the time they meet, we see that these two are going to live up to their identities of falsehood and sexual mischief, since Stephen is really Chigariro, Wiridzai's father, and Catherine is Pendeka, Wiridzai's girlfriend whom he deeply loves. Thus, Pendeka is intimate to both father and son. Matters get complex when she falls pregnant by Stephen, but tells Wiridzai that it is his pregnancy. She goes to his home to get formally introduced to his family as their new daughter-in-law, only to be confronted by Stephen, at the same home!

One way of explaining Pendeka's unfaithful behavior towards Wiridzai is to look at it through Marx's and Engels' theory of materialism. Stephen, being a working boyfriend, satisfies Pendeka's material needs, while Wiridzai who is a mere school boy cannot.

The women as portrayed in this novel are, therefore, of three types: the subservient woman, Chigariro's wife; the jealous gossips, her neighbours;

and the truant, sexually promiscuous Pendeka and her friend Zviregwe. The men are in two categories only: the morally decadent, represented by Chigariro and a Gweru Teachers College lecturer who hopes to seduce Pendeka; and the morally upright represented by Wiridzai who is faithful to Pendeka. Unfortunately, he is the one who ends up deceived and hurt. Once again, the women have not come out in good light in this novel. Wiridzai is in the category of Jemisi in *Ndakagara Ndazviona*; men who get compromised by the girls' extreme infidelity and greed. These girls contrast sharply with Tambudzai of *Zviuya Zviri Mberi*, a woman who can correctly be described as a paragon of virtue. The end of the novel is amazing, contrived, one might say, because instead of Hove resolving the complex issue of father and son possessing one girlfriend, she resorts to the supernatural and spiritual world of *mashavi* or *svikiro* (spirit medium) to resolve this strange issue. It is a *svikiro* who reveals the identity of the man responsible for Pendeka's pregnancy, ending the novel with that devastating news.

## Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to explore gender issues as depicted in the five selected novels by Shona female writers. These Shona novels have consciously portrayed complex gender issues where both men and women do not always acquit themselves positively. The men and women who populate these novels are, to a great extent, driven by the need to satisfy basic material needs. The struggle to satisfy these basic needs sometimes leads people into circumstances where they exploit each other and invariably, girls and women find themselves at the receiving end, with their sexuality being exploited.

The authors have also dealt with the complex issues of love, marriage, education and women's career opportunities in an African society, in an equally complex manner. Hopefully, the reader will find new insights revealed here and will be encouraged to search for more hidden meanings in these wonderful works, which fit snugly into the African literary canon of Zimbabwe.

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Maurice Taonezvi Vambe

## Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explore the fictional representation of women in two of Sharai Mukonoweshuro's novels, namely, *Ndakagara Ndazviona* (1990) and *Akafuratidzwa Moyo* (1983). Traditional Shona expectations of how a woman should behave have prescribed the roles that women are expected to play in society. In a colonial context such as was provided by Rhodesia, colonialism invented customary laws in which women were further downgraded to social positions akin to those of minors. Although the nationalist struggle was essentially meant to guarantee freedom for all blacks irrespective of gender, the male elites constructed black women as their inferior 'other'. This was done in spite of the fact that in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, women fought side by side with men. This chapter argues that Sharai Mukonoweshuro's novels struggle against these male sanctioned stereotypes. However, as will be shown, Mukonoweshuro's mode of resistance to female stereotypes is ambivalent; the author constructs young women who defy patriarchy on the one hand, and, on the other, old women who do the unthinkable act of poisoning their own sons.

## Women in male writings

As already indicated, Shona traditional culture has prescribed roles for women. For example, in Shona culture, a good woman is one who is stoic, self-effacing, loyal and a biological mother. In her book, *Images of Women in Zimbabwean Literature* (1985), Rudo Gaidzanwa analyzes fourteen novels in Shona and Ndebele language literatures. Of these, only one is by a woman. Gaidzanwa accuses male writers of portraying women in what she terms passive and negative images of womanhood. These women appear in male fiction as stoic mothers, deceitful wives, gossips, murderers, and prostitutes. Such images are considered dangerous because they deny African women agency. According to Rudo Gaidzanwa (1985:8), 'the images delegitimize their [women's] struggles for fundamental rights and freedoms such as the right to education, jobs, health and other valued goods and services in society'.

If a woman behaves in a way that does not conform to, and confirms these stereotypes, she is labeled a witch, prostitute and murderer. These definitions are meant to control, not only the sexuality of black women, but their social movement as well. The politics of representing female characters is then not neutral. Elleke Boehmer (1992) further observes that although women in male fiction command and occupy high statuses in symbolical representation, in real life they occupy the lowest wrung of the social ladder. While in traditional society black women could be held as pawns and captives in war, under colonialism their situation worsened as they were downgraded to minors. Women were considered intellectually and morally weak, but sexually dangerous (Elizabeth Schmidt, 1992). During Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, the images of women in both the public and private spheres in the Shona society did not change significantly. Women were not only sexually exploited, but were also shown 'in action' - mounting guns at camps - although most were not allowed to fight at the warfront (Josephine Nkomo-Simbanegavi, 2000).

It is against this difficult background that women such as Sharai Mukonoweshuro attempt to recreate social reality. Professional commitments, poverty and child rearing take time away from women. When women finally write, they find themselves and their work frowned upon by a dominant male literary tradition that has anointed itself as the canon. Florence Stratton (1994:1) puts the predicament of female black writers in Africa clearly when she complains that,

[I]n characterizing African literature, critics have ignored gender as a social and analytical category. Such characterizations operate to exclude women's literary expression as part of African literature. Hence what they define is the male literary tradition.

For Stratton, critical practice is not an innocent undertaking. It authorizes particular vocabularies that can work to expand or narrow the range of creative possibilities for women's writings in Africa. Women writers have faced challenges of seeking to assail and transcend literary stereotypes of female characters in male fiction.

## Women, nation and literary voice

Arising from the attempts by male writers to 'erase the female writer or character in fiction', suggestions have been made as how to promote strategies

of selving' (Boemer, 1992:9) for women writers. For Liz Gunner and her fellow researchers (Gunner, 2001:133), the capacity for women to create a literature that society will listen to depends on 'their ability to mark out a path contrary to what the [male]stereotype demanded, chart a counter discourse, answer a master narrative', a process that interlocks debates relating to empowerment, space, voice and identity. This would then enable women writers to project their literary and creative voices into the public arena where they can negotiate new identities. However, some feminists such as the African-American, Angela Y. Davis, have complicated this picture that suggests that when women write about women, they are inherently endowed with perceptions that always seek to liberate other women. Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000) supports the view that sometimes ordinary women, and even female writers, are consciously and unwittingly made to write as women, but articulating the dominant male views which enjoin women to be loyal, and not question the unequal relations between men and women in society. This contradiction in the way women write about themselves is apparent in Sharai Mukonoweshuro's novel, *Ndakagara Ndazviona* (1983).

### ***Ndakagara Ndazviona and ambivalent female response to patriarchy***

*Ndakagara Ndazviona* has a simple plot, which involves a young beautiful girl, Revai, who is enticed into a sexual liaison by her aunt's old husband, VaMhosva. Revai becomes pregnant and this angers her one-time high school lover, Jemisi. Jemisi hatches a plan to win Revai back, which involves stabbing VaMhosva to death. What follows is a tale of woe as Revai is thrown out of VaMhosva's home by the latter's brothers. Revai is deprived of VaMhosva's property which includes a café that she should have inherited. She is forced to take her baby boy, Tasara, to her rural home to stay with her parents. However, VaBhande, Revai's maternal uncle, takes her to town in the hope of finding a job for her. In the Highfield suburb of Harare, Revai meets Jemisi who makes her pregnant. The crisis emerges when Revai brings Tasara where Jemisi is lodging. Jemisi does not want Tasara in his home because the baby reminds him of VaMhosva whom he killed. In a war of words that ensues between Revai and Jemisi, the latter takes a hoe and strikes Revai on the head. Even though Jemisi is arrested, by the end of the novel Revai blames herself and pledges to forgive Jemisi, and become his wife once he is out of jail. The author invests

Revai with qualities such as physical beauty, sensuousness, stoicism, self-effacing, victimhood and deceitfulness.

When the reader first meets Revai, she is being persuaded to marry VaMhosva by her mother, VaRegedzai. Revai's mother sees the potential of wealth coming into her home from such a union:

VaMhosva vakubvuma woziva kuti wagarika mwana wangu. Haisi fuma yavainayo, mombe, mbudzi, huku ifararira. Futi ndakanza kuti vari kuvakisa kefa pajakata. Zvingwa ungaita zvokuvata wakatsamira (16).

If Mr Mhosva accepts you as wife, know my child that you are sitting pretty. He has cattle, goats and chickens. I also heard that he is building a café in Jakarta. You will really sit pretty.

VaRegedzai is responding to the necessity of economic and material security when the reader sees her pushing her own daughter into a polygamous relationship. What is striking here is that VaRegedzai, a woman, as well as Revai, are working to undermine VaMhosva's stable relationship with his wife, VaMandinika. Although Mai Rudo, (VaMhosva's wife) does not quit, a vendetta has been sown between VaMandinika and Revai. VaMandinika responds with characteristic anger to the marital coup. The worrying issue is that the writer has not moved away from stereotypical images of women as human beings who destroy each other's families. Also, although we read that Revai is now staying with VaMhosva, Jemisi still comes to visit her. On one such occasion, Revai and Jemisi are almost caught red-handed by VaMhosva before Revai helps Jemisi escape. The picture that is being painted of Revai is that of marital infidelity. Revai is depicted as being deceitful, and as the one who encourages Jemisi to visit her. She also conceals Jemisi's romantic moves from VaMhosva. In fact, Revai still addresses Jemisi as her lover, despite the fact that at one time, Jemisi almost raped her even though she was still VaMhosva's wife. It is possible to argue that there is deep love between Revai and Jemisi despite Revai's marriage to VaMhosva. As the narrator tells us:

Rudo kana rwabata munhu haazozivi zvaanoita...Ndiyo mhosva muchindiona ndakadai izvi nhasi Uno. Rudo ndirwo rwakandipinza mungozi ino (130).

When one falls in love, one is confused... That is why you see me in this problem of having overreacted[by killing VaMhosva].

Jemisi justifies why he killed VaMhosva by suggesting that he was overpowered by emotions. As he confesses, '*Ndiyo mhosva ndakauraya VaMhosva*' (That is why I killed VaMhosva) (119). However, Revai cannot understand why Jemisi had to commit murder in order to express his love for her. When Jemisi realizes that Revai is going to the police, it is then that he strikes Revai's head with a hoe. The irony is that despite the fact that Jemisi almost murdered her, Revai feels pity for him and would want to forgive him. As the narrator says:

Revai akatanga kunzwira Jemisi urombo. 'Ini ndini ndakanganisa', akadaro achipukuta misodzi pamatama. 'Dai ndakanga ndisina kumbotorana naVaMhosva nhamo yese iyi pangadai pasina. Jemisi haana mhosva. Mhosva ndeyangu' (136).

Revai began to feel pity for Jemisi. 'I am the one who was wrong', she said wiping tears off her cheeks. 'If I had not associated with Mr Mhosva, there would have been no problem. Jemisi has no crime that he committed. I am the source of the problem.'

In this passage, Revai is portrayed as unthinking and self-incriminating. She condemns herself for the mishaps of her life. In the process she absolves VaMhosva who raped her and forced her into a loveless marriage. Revai also frees Jemisi from the blame of killing VaMhosva. And, lastly, Revai also blames herself for 'angering' Jemisi who nearly murdered her using a hoe. At this point in the narrative, the reader feels that the writer has undermined Revai's struggle to determine whom she must love. The author has created in Revai an ambivalent image of a black woman who can love deeply, is deceitful, but forgiving to the man who poses as a physical threat to her life. This string of negative images used to depict Revai's different emotional states reinforces the patriarchal images of women as treacherous and morally weak. What Revai's speech does to the whole story is to endorse a conception and perception by African men of black women as marginal and inconsequential to the life of the nation. This subverts women's efforts to empower themselves and to contribute towards nation building. Sharai Mukonoweshuro's attempt to recreate social reality ironically undercuts the efforts of black women in real life. Unwittingly, the

author's negative portrayal of women like Revai challenges feminist critics such as Rudo Gaidzanwa who believe that women's writing is necessarily and inherently progressive in the ways it composes the images of women and nation. In Mukonoweshuro's creative imagination, female characters are coterminous with the nation in so far as they represent the underside or the negative forces of that nation.

At the end of the novel in question, even educated women such as Dambudziko, who is a nurse, and is supposed to have critical consciousness as regards women's rights, works hard to persuade Revai to believe that Jemisi, a potential murderer, is the one who can make Revai happy. It can be argued that through Dambudziko, the writer suggests that some women work hard to persuade other women that being subordinate to men is natural. Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1987) depicts a similar condition of nervousness in women like Tambudzai's mother who enjoins Tambudzai to get married and not question inequalities within the marriage institution. In other words, Mukonoweshuro could be understood to be arguing against this cultural status quo. This depiction is, however, not critically contested in the novel and the reader is left with the impression that the author subscribes to the notion that a woman is 'complete' when she is married to some man, no matter how bad the relations of the marriage are. In fact, at the end of the novel, Revai goes to Rafamwoyo, Jemisi's home.

Readers may feel that the novel has slotted negative images of womanhood within a patriarchal paradigm without questioning the assumptions underlying that system of negative signification. Readers may also feel that a novel in which a woman chooses death instead of life, thereby undercutting the very indigenous culture that women have to preserve, perpetuate and promote as the basis of a transformed African culture, is perpetuating anti-social attitudes. This ambivalent depiction of female characters might even go to show not only the extent to which negative Shona attitudes have shaped the creative sensibilities of the author, but also how they have constrained her from experimenting with positive images of womanhood where she would have wanted to. In fact, until 1980, when Zimbabwe gained independence from Britain, 'all African women, married or unmarried, were perpetual minors, always under the guardianship of their fathers, their husbands, or some male relative' (Stewart et al, 1990:170). But this point does not mean that female writers cannot rise above the descriptions of women in populist law made by patriarchy for the preservation of the institution where men rule women.

Another way of reading this novel is to discuss the contradictions of the representation of gender in nationalism. While analyzing the characterization of black women in male African literature, Florence Stratton (1994:4) observes that the unequal relations between men and women in real life are reproduced at a symbolical level in African literatures. In Senghorian terms, the mother figure is represented as nourishing and caring, yet in real life the same woman is wearing tattered clothes, hungry and at times violated sexually by the same men who raise her status through this symbol. Shona society depicted in *Ndakagara Ndazviona* emphasizes female conformity to the rule of men. It is thus an act of transgression when Revai resists her family and Shona society by having a secret love relationship with Jemisi even when she has a baby and is living with VaMhosva. By this gesture of rebellion, Revai has turned her back on some Shona customs which force young girls to marry men old enough to be their fathers. Elizabeth Schmidt (1992) who writes on the history of the Shona women before and during colonialism, states that young women who felt coerced into unwanted and loveless marriages often resisted in ways that registered their discontent. Resistance took the form of running away with young men or, if still co-habiting within the arranged marriage contract, denying the old man sexual favours. In *Ndakagara Ndazviona*, the irony is that the same rebellious Revai is prepared to sacrifice her life when she chooses to live with Jemisi who nearly killed her. That might be the author's attempt to direct the reader to the complexity of the character of Revai. This ambivalent mode of survival under patriarchy is radically expanded in *Akafuratidzwa Moyo* (1983) in which a woman takes the shocking decision to poison her son, just because he is too loyal to his wife to the point of denying his mother the niceties she used to enjoy before his marriage.

### **Murderous women: *Akafuratidzwa Moyo***

The idea that some feminist critics who push for the recognition of women's rights sometimes make large claims for the freedom of women can be tested in *Akafuratidzwa Moyo*. This book has a simple plot that raises fundamental issues about changes in Shona society that is becoming increasingly materialistic. In the novel, VaMakandionei complains that her daughter-in-law has all the qualities deplored in the Shona culture: *unodada* (she wants to show off) (4), and...*kunyima* (she is mean), *usimbe* (she is lazy), *ufeve* (she has loose morals), *ndipo pamusha pazvo* ) (she has all the negative attributes) (6). VaMakandionei does not understand that colonial capitalist relations of

production in Rhodesia have transformed the extended family in irreversible and tragic ways. The market and money economy is organized in ways that make people fail to fend for their previously loved ones. As a result, money is not enough for people's needs. The communal ethos of spontaneous sharing is under siege. As a result, the likes of Svinurai, though employed, are forced to focus on satisfying the material needs of their nucleus family. He can only help the extended family to a limited extent. Mukonoweshuro therefore makes the vital observation that capitalism has cut the umbilical cord in the African family. VaMakandionei thinks that Machivei refuses to share the niceties that Svinurai brings home. One might argue that this tension-ridden relationship between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in law has precedence in African culture with the two women competing to control the son and husband, respectively.

In the novel in question, the undeclared war between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law leads to disastrous consequences. Seemingly fed up with what she perceives as Machivei's tight fist where money is concerned, VaMakandionei hatches a murderous plan to kill Machivei together with her children. VaMakandionei lights the fire that burns the house in which her son's family is sleeping, and feigns innocence. This murderous act serves to confirm the stereotypical perception of women as naturally destructive. Not only is VaMakandionei unhappy that her son's wife and children have not died in the inferno, she also resents the fact that Svinurai will not take action to divorce Machivei. In fact, VaMakandionei turns her anger against her son, whom she kills through beer poisoning. It is possible here to suggest that colonial modernity has thrown up tensions in the African family that manifest themselves through struggles to control the perceived benefits from colonialism. Unfortunately, the family is depicted as being ill-equipped to deal with the challenges of the new dispensation.

The general anti-social behavior of VaMakandionei, ironically finds sympathy in critics such as Rudo Gaidzanwa (1985:13), who argue unconvincingly that '*the kinds of calculations and choices that the woman creates are the mark of liberation and freedom*' (emphasis, mine). In the case of VaMakandionei, her 'calculations' and 'choices' are not an index of liberation and freedom, but of moral degeneration. They are a mark of irresponsibility which has contributed to the unfortunate perception that all women are dangerous. Writing about women perceived as dangerous in male nationalist discourses, Liz Gunner et al (1994:118) distinguishes the dangerous woman

who is destructive in the reckless sense, and the dangerous woman who destroys in order to re-vision a new way of life:

They were dangerous and that is why man both feared them and wished to control them. They were perceived as dangerous in that they might influence other women to follow their lifestyles as they were often single or divorced women. The sense of danger was also connected with a sense of their ability to re-vision; through their expressive art. They could both reshape and control in a way that was otherwise not possible. This notion of power relates to the acceptance in many African societies of licence, in some situations, within song and poetry - that singers may tell terrible things in song and poetry, set out what is not usually heard and survive with impunity.

But VaMakandionei is neither a singer nor an artist of any sort. Her actions are motivated by possessiveness, envy and greed. The actions confirm the patriarchal image of woman as violent, deceitful and dangerous and, therefore, constantly needing to be monitored and morally guided by men. Women such as VaMakandionei therefore provide justification for the indiscriminate arrest of black women in the early eighties and nineties as principal offenders in family murders that involved sexual liaisons.

It is also possible to suggest that in creating a character as evil as VaMakandionei, the author does not wish to condone violence of any kind, whether perpetrated on women by another woman or on women by men. This is evidenced by the fact that at the end of the novel, VaMakandionei hangs herself. If credit is due to the author, it is because she has created a memorable negative character who becomes in Zimbabwean literature the archetype of what a woman should never be. Considered in this vein, through the character of VaMakandionei, the author could be suggesting that the traditional Shona society built on traditional expectations of communal solidarity is bound to implode or snap when confronted by a virile material acquisitiveness introduced by colonialism. The author could also be suggesting that although Zimbabwe has gone through two - now three Chimurenga struggles in which women participated actively as guerrillas - there has not been qualitative change in ordinary people's lives at a cultural level.

In feminist criticism such as one evinced by Rudo Gaidzanwa, women who rebel and those who kill for whatever reason are potential makers of history.

This ideological standpoint raises moral concerns about the fundamental motivation, interests and end-result of killing. When is killing justified? *Akafuratidzwa Moyo* is published in the 1980s when the discourse of women's liberation and rights is firmly entrenched and promoted by women themselves. The irony is that the author's repertoire of images of women murderers who are motivated by envy is limited, and this tends to undermine her desire to represent women as carriers of progressive aspects of feminism.

Mukonoweshuro's images of potential womanhood give the impression that she is confirming the male idea that women need to be under the perpetual guidance of men. However, due to changes that have taken place in women's lives in the last twenty-four years, this does not correspond to the realities of women in present-day Zimbabwe. The question is, what do readers have to conclude about an author who gives a gallery of images that pass as negative models of womanhood in real life? It is possible to argue that the author's low level of consciousness has not undergone change and that as such, she is still operating with male stereotypes of the expected roles of women in society. This would then suggest that although black women writers can, and do indeed participate in narrating the nation, it is not a given that what they write and the images they authorize necessarily shake the discriminatory foundations of patriarchy. In fact, female authors like Mukonoweshuro have consciously or unwittingly been co-opted by the dominant patriarchal order to muzzle and marginalize the potentialities of womanhood in fiction.

In other words, the voices of women authoring or authorizing women is not a straight-forward undertaking, but an arduous process which sometimes brings out unintended results. That is why it is difficult to agree with Florence Stratton's overstatement on female writers' agency in her authoritative conclusions to her book, *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994:173) where she argues that,

When women began publishing their work in the mid-sixties in Africa, they faced the problem of not only speaking for the experience of women in their own right...but also of combating the orthodoxies of colonial and anti-colonial writing.  
These sort of generalizations from established critics need to be questioned because the claims they make for black women writers do not apply to all

women writers. Women writers' consciousness is uneven in their handling of themes related to women's lives.

## Women and voicing the nation in indigenous languages

As part of her desire to recreate social reality with women at the centre of her discourse, Mukonoweshuro has resorted to the use of the Shona language. Her Shona language in the two novels considered in this chapter is distinctively marked by the Karanga dialect of the people of Masvingo Province in the south west of Zimbabwe. It is as if the author is making an intervention in the language debate in African literature. Some of the passages in *Ndakagara Ndazviona* are memorable because they are steeped in an idiom which the Shona people in general, and the people of Masvingo in particular, are bound to identify as theirs:

‘Unoda kuona kuti ndinodii nhai? Usatambe uchidaro.’

‘Aizve hautendi nhai? Uchatenda waona SaTomasi.’

‘Uchindiona kudai ndinotova nedumbu.’

‘Ahii zvechokwadi chaizvo, ndarema ini.’

‘Unofunga ndingatenda nhema dzakaidaro?’(22).

‘You want to see what I will do? Try to be serious.

‘Of course, you are not believing? You shall believe after seeing like the biblical Thomas.’

‘As you see me I am pregnant.’

‘It is true I am pregnant.’

‘You think I will listen and believe that jest?’

This dialogue between Revai and Jemisi reveals Mukonoweshuro as a distinct Shona author who can blend the old idiom (*Ndarema* - I am pregnant) with modernist jargon (*Ndingatenda nhema* - You think I will believe those lies). But it seems in *Ndakagara Ndazviona* and *Akafuratidzwa Moyo*, the author has indulged in the use of the Shona language without some corresponding critical perspectives to question the female stereotypes that she creates and exposes. The use of indigenous languages on their own, without developing an expanded critical consciousness to interrogate the basis of social oppression, will not promote the very indigenous cultures that she wishes to advance.

## Conclusions

Sharai Mukonoweshuro, one of the few female Shona writers writing in the Shona language, has not received substantial critical analysis. She writes her novels under extreme conditions in which the images of women in fiction and in real life are negative due to a largely male-dominated literary tradition. After analyzing *Ndakagara Ndazviona* and *Akfuratidzwa Moyo*, one detects a genuine desire by the author to push women's rights onto the public sphere. There is no doubt that the author's young female characters struggle in subtle ways against societal restrictions to achieve their freedom. There is also the question that in focusing on the politics of the domestic sphere, the author attempts to expand on the notion of national culture as rooted in the private and public experiences of the characters. By focusing on the conflicts that take place in the domestic sphere, the author also assails the male tradition whose conception of politics and resistance revolves around visible organized forms of political agency. But one also gets a sense that in an attempt to narrate the nation by giving voices to female characters, the author is entrapped in a male-dominated discourse of cultural nationalism whose tendency is to objectify women.

This chapter acknowledges open revolt by female characters against the Shona cultural norms which would have made women totally helpless under men, had they been allowed free space in the novel. The chapter also acknowledges the potential power of cultural implantation that sometimes undermines the author's desire to recreate images of progressive women.

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# Perpetuation of colonial stereotypes in Ndebele fiction written by women: Its impact on the changing roles of women in modern society

T. Matshakayile-Ndlovu

## Introduction

This chapter examines the portrayal of women in siNdebele novels written by women that had been published by the year 2000. It is hoped that the choice of this date will enable the researcher to accommodate all the siNdebele novels written by women in Zimbabwe to date.

In discussing the question of the perpetuation of colonial stereotypes in siNdebele novels written by women, the researcher takes into account the view expressed by Ruth Sherry (1988:7) that:

Much literature written by women, in whatever period, clearly reflects the contemporary, social and political situation.

It will be necessary, therefore, to make reference to the period in which each work is published in order to determine to what extent the writer is in line with the social, economic and political situation then. It will then be possible to suggest some of the ways of looking at the issues raised by the writer in a way that could empower women.

The works examined in this chapter are those by prominent female writers who include Sithembile Mlilo, Barbara Makhala, Eunice Mthethwa, Doris Ndlovu, Leah Mazibuko, Eggy Makhalima and Sophie Sibanda. The work of Lassie Ndondo, the first female writer of Ndebele fiction in the then Rhodesia, has been left out because it is now out of print. This list is short compared to what has been published by male writers. The paucity of female writers is, however, not surprising because it is a well-known fact that when European education was introduced in Africa, very few girls were given opportunity to go to school. They then remained oral storytellers when men became creative writers. It is also regrettable that the works that are considered here are all set in the colonial period. There is therefore need to have women writers who will look at women's issues in the post-independence era. The

writers are analyzed separately, but where there are a lot of similarities between the works they are considered together.

### The works of Sithembile Mlilo

Mlilo published two novels, *Lifile* (1975) and *Bantu BeHadlana* (1977). The novels deal with the impact of urbanization on rural communities. The time settings are the 1920s when the city of Bulawayo was still a relatively small town, with one or two African townships. The events oscillate between Bulawayo and the rural area of the present day Kezi in the Matebeleland South Province.

Mlilo's approach in presenting her male and female characters is guided by her support for the official colonial policy with regards to urbanization and the black population. Successive colonial government policy on urbanization regarded urban areas as permanent residential areas for white settlers, and temporary homes for black male workers who were expected to return to their rural areas when they were on leave, out of employment or after retirement. Black females were expected to visit urban areas only at the invitation of their husbands who would do so after obtaining a permit from the city authorities. This is supported by the existence of such townships as Makhokhoba in Bulawayo, which were built as single rooms to house working males only.

In the two novels in question, Mlilo's rural characters stress that any girl who goes to Bulawayo is a prostitute. In *Lifile*, when people learn that Lifile, the main character, has gone to Bulawayo to look for employment, they express surprise as this is something that is unheard of. Only male children can do that. The writer allows the girl to arrive in Bulawayo, but never gives the readers an opportunity to see her searching for employment. The reader meets her when she is involved in a fight with other girls over boyfriends. After a while she is hospitalized because of a sexually transmitted disease. All the girls who go to Bulawayo, including Lifile, become prostitutes in this novel.

The writer seems to be influenced by the traditional division of gender roles in Ndebele society, where the sphere of influence for females is around the home and in the kitchen, whereas that of the males is in the forest and around the cattle kraal. Mlilo seems to want to see the situation continued in the 1970s. She wants African girls to remain in the rural areas helping their mothers until they marry, while young men go to the cities to look for employment. She ignores the socio-economic changes that have been brought about by colonialism. Besides, she seems to be unaware of the fact that the removal of young men from the rural areas is upsetting the stability of the rural people since young women are now deprived of potential husbands.

It is a well-known fact that the advent of colonialism dispossessed Africans of their wealth and forced them to sell their labour in exchange for money. Yet the writer expects the female child to remain in the rural areas, unaffected by all these changes. Furthermore, the advent of colonial rule brought new things that transformed African people's values. European education introduced by both the missionaries and the settler government transformed the African's perceptions of life. (In both novels the church school is the centre of change). Young people aspired to wear European clothes, eat European food and adopt European ways of doing things. This then forced the young woman to go to the city against all odds. She saw the city as the only place that could empower her to access the new life.

As depicted by Mlilo, it is true that the African parent of the 1920s resisted the young woman's desire to move to urban areas. It is important to remember what Ruth Sherry (1988:5) says about literature:

One thing, which most readers look for in literature, at least some of the time, is some reflection of their own experiences.

In line with the expectations of African literature, writers are expected to make insightful observations about what is happening in society. Readers expect Mlilo to appreciate the predicament faced by African women during the colonial era in relation to economic deprivation. There were no resources in the rural areas to sustain the young woman, and yet she was denied the opportunity to work in the new urban areas. Mlilo's female characters that force their way into Bulawayo should be seen as pioneers who are paving the way for women's economic empowerment. By portraying them as villains, Mlilo is indeed perpetuating colonial stereotypes since colonial authorities failed to appreciate the impact of colonialism on African women. Unfortunately, African parents were also so concerned with preserving cultural traditions that they failed to appreciate the negative impact of colonialism on their female children. Mlilo portrays female characters as people who go to town in pursuit of pleasure. Furthermore, she does not appreciate how colonial education impacted on young women. Not all young women put marriage as their first priority, as there were new alternatives to be pursued before getting married. The two books therefore capture the experiences of adults, but fail to deal with the concerns of the young women of that period.

## The works of Barbara Makhala

Makhala has published three novels *Qilindini* (1974), *Umendo* (1977) and *Impilo Yinkinga* (1983). The portrayal of female characters differs from novel to novel; therefore, each novel will be treated separately. The settings of the first two novels are the colonial period while the last one covers both the colonial and the period immediately after the attainment of independence.

In *Qilindini* the writer's focus seems to be on how traditional healers take advantage of the economic problems faced by the blacks to rob them of the little resources that they still have. The female characters are portrayed as powerless individuals whose survival is dependent on men of good will in their society. First, we are introduced to two old women whom we meet doing laundry at the local river. One of them has a husband who works in town and only comes home at month ends. She complains that husbands who work in town never appreciate the hardships faced by women who remain behind taking care of the rural home. Although the women discuss the problems they face in the absence of their husbands, no concrete action is suggested as to how they can deal with the problem of absent husbands. The subject is never raised again in the novel. It is as if Makhala is saying this is the usual gossip of women when they meet. One would have expected a more meaningful discussion of this phenomenon that is disrupting life, rather than the writer's cursory approach to it.

Secondly, we meet MaBhebhe who is married to Zikhali, a prominent headman and ambitious man who wants to acquire wealth quickly. MaBhebhe admires her husband for his ambitions and wishes him success, but the writer never brings the two together to discuss their future plans and how they could go about executing them. MaBhebhe remains passive and is happy to leave everything to her husband. But when Zikhali is arrested for killing the sheep of some of his community members as a way of enhancing his wealth, MaBhebhe divorces him and goes back to live with her relatives. She cannot face the future on her own. This then seems to perpetuate the idea that women need to be looked after. When a man asks for a woman's hand in marriage, the traditional question asked is: *Will he look after her?* It is as if the woman will not make a contribution towards the welfare of the family. Again, Ndebele society expects a divorced woman to go back to her parents or relatives. It is as if divorced women are not capable of sustaining themselves.

While it can be argued that Makhala is being realistic in portraying MaBhebhe in this manner, it must be remembered that a writer does not only

mirror the world as it is, but also as the writer wishes it to be. What MaBhebhe has done is perhaps what her society expects her to do, but the writer has to fight this stereotypical view as Rasebotsa and Mdema (1998:ix) say:

Members of society are conditioned to think, and consequently behave, in a predetermined manner. Society's attitude is in direct opposition to its needs: its preference for stereotypical and the non-confrontational deprives it of the dynamic potential of those of its members who have traditionally not been considered leaders.

Once MaBhebhe returns to her relatives, her future is sealed. The writer seems to be suggesting that without a husband, MaBhebhe faces a grim future. She has to depend on her relatives for sustenance. The writer has to help women in MaBhebhe's position to break from a restrictive mode that only permits them to survive as wives. They must be made to realize that they can have a successful life as independent divorced women. Women's fiction can assist in this direction.

Finally, Thenjiwe, MaBhebhe's niece, is a young orphaned woman brought up by her aunt MaBhebhe. Her aunt pays for her education up to primary school level, although there is no explanation why she could not go beyond that level. In the meantime, her aunt is torn between allowing her husband Zikhali to marry Thenjiwe as per Ndebele culture, or, allowing the local chief to marry her. Meanwhile, Thenjiwe is not interested in the two men but appears powerless to get out of this predicament. She falls in love with the family gardener who promises to marry her and live with her somewhere else once he completes a project that he is working on. To Thenjiwe, the only way to escape is to marry this gardener whom they call Mnyasa, meaning a man from Malawi (Nyasaland during its colonial days). His real name is James Phiri. Thenjiwe has no idea of her boyfriend's project, and this does not seem to bother her. The writer does not give the reader a chance to see Thenjiwe's vision of her future. This implies that the writer does not give women the initiative to direct their own lives, their own destiny. It is men of good will who must rescue the poor women. Eventually, James Phiri arrests Zikhali and other criminals for killing the community's sheep, thus completing his project just on time. He then marries Thenjiwe after the local chief has died from shock of discovering that the people he trusted so much are criminals. The writer is thus using the marriage motif as a way of saving women from their predicament. This calls to mind a Ndebele folktale where, just before their

death, parents tell their daughter to marry her aunt's husband. This does not empower modern women to take control of their own destiny, instead it makes them wholly dependent on men, thus running the risk of being exploited by unscrupulous men. Thenjiwe needs to be made to realize that besides marriage, there are alternative ways of economically and socially sustaining herself. This would be in line with womanism, a theory that emphasizes the interdependence between men and women.

In *Umendo*, Makhalisa creates two types of women characters: the bad and the good. Her good woman is portrayed as a passive victim of colonial as well as gender oppression. On the other hand, the bad woman is seen as evil hearted, she is not sympathetic to the plight of other women and is ready to oppress them. But Makhalisa seems not to be aware of the fact that her bad woman is also a victim of colonial oppression as well as patriarchy. Therefore, like her good woman, her bad woman needs support in getting out of this double oppression.

Colonial oppression was evident in the way colonial governments deprived black people of their civil liberties such as being segregated, denied decent accommodation and the right to be with their families in the city. These men would in turn express their frustrations by subjecting their wives to physical and psychological violence. The women thus received double oppression, from the colonial government that oppressed all black people, and from their own husbands.

In the novel in question, Gugu, gets married to Ndaba soon after completing her 'O' levels because her father fails to pay her school fees beyond this level. Ndaba goes to work in Bulawayo while Gugu remains in the rural area with MaZulu, Ndaba's aunt. Ndaba promises to live with his family in town once he has secured good accommodation. But before this happens, Ndaba falls in love with another woman in the city and forgets about his family. At home, MaZulu accuses Gugu of hiding money and food that Ndaba sends her, and hence a quarrel ensues between them. Gugu is driven to Bulawayo but Ndaba will not have her stay there. She tries to go to her own parents but her father drives her back to her husband. Rejected by both worlds, Gugu decides to fend for herself by seeking wage employment in the town of Gweru where she is assisted by a male former schoolmate to get a job and, finally, to become a pre-school teacher.

The bad women in this novel are stereotypes of traditional perceptions of the colonial period when men were physically separated from their wives.

First, we have the conflict between MaZulu and Gugu that takes a traditional perspective, that is, the expected conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law over the control of the goodies that the son brings home from work. It must be emphasized again that tradition is here being seen from the period of the advent of colonial rule that introduced the separation of husbands from their wives for long periods of time. It also saw young men employed in the city sending their mothers parcels, a practice which became difficult to maintain once they got married, thus fuelling the traditional mother-in-law–daughter-in-law rivalry. Failure to perceive the conflict in this manner might lead one to label MaZulu a bad mother-in-law, and fail to appreciate the pressure exerted on her by the roles she is called upon to play. Makhala is portrayed as a greedy fat woman (*Esimafutha* is her nickname). This implies that she has more than what she needs. The writer is inviting the reader to be sympathetic to Gugu and hostile to MaZulu. The writer overlooks the fact that MaZulu's husband is away at work in town and therefore she has to play the role of father, mother, herd-boy and all the other roles that her husband would have played. The writer even says that MaZulu's husband is happier staying away from her because of her bad character.

The writer therefore makes no effort to explore the causes of conflict between the mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law. Can two women cook in one kitchen, using the same scant resources, without conflict? Is it desire for space that causes mother-in-law and daughter-in-law to be in conflict? What used to happen in traditional society before the advent of colonial rule? All these issues are not looked into, largely because MaZulu has already been portrayed in a bad light.

The second bad character is Jenny, the prostitute. Commenting on the work of Barton and Ruth (1853), Ruth Sherry (1988:11) states that Gaskell gives a sympathetic account of the economic circumstances that lead to prostitution, a far cry from what is portrayed by Makhala. All we are told about people like Jenny is that they are evil women who do not hesitate to separate husbands and wives. Again, the writer directs her anger against women who are prostitutes, not against men who demand sex from these women, not even against the colonial government that denies these women opportunities of employment. The irony is that when Makhala allows Gugu to describe the relationship between Jenny and Ndaba, what comes out is that Jenny is Ndaba's wife and she desires to be treated as such as long as Ndaba continues to provide

for her. We are told that when Gugu arrives in the city house in the absence of Ndaba and Jenny and lets herself in, she is impressed by what she finds:

Wababbabamba izihlalo lezi ezinhle ezaziyibutifitifi uNdaba ayethu uzammelela bayezidinga bobabili ukuze babonisane, kodwa wabuka wakholwa ukuba uNdaba wayefisa ukuba afikele endlini epheleleyo ngobuhle (30)).

She admired the lovely lounge suite. She remembered that Ndaba had said he would wait for her so that they would assist each other to select the lounge suite, but she was satisfied that Ndaba wanted her to find a lovely home.

This description fits a well-looked after house run by a caring housewife who is determined to have a happy, life-long relationship with her husband. It is clear, therefore, that Makhala's bad women are women without resources who look up to men to provide for them just like the good women do. Men have access to the limited resources available to blacks and they use these resources to exploit women. Rather than perceive the situation in this manner, Makhala falls into the traditional trap that views men as unable to resist women's sexual advances, thus blaming women for the fall of men. In the novel, it is Jenny who takes the bigger share of the blame.

On the other hand, good women are those who are powerless in every respect and survive only on the good will of their husbands. Gugu's mother, for instance, feels powerless to assist her daughter. She cannot even persuade her husband to talk to Gugu. In the first place, Gugu is in this dilemma because her mother had failed to convince her husband that Gugu, like other young people of her time, should be allowed to continue with her education and become a professional woman. The writer succumbs to the colonial belief that women have to be totally subservient to husbands, as seen from Gugu's behaviour. When her neighbor tells her to go to Bulawayo and check on why her husband is no longer sending her money, she refuses to do so without his permission. However, when all the traditional avenues of solving her problems have failed, she is left with no option but to break with colonial tradition. She becomes determined to fend for herself without her husband's assistance. It is this determination to solve one's problems without relying on men that Makhala

appears to be advancing through this portrayal of Gugu. Here she seems to be contradicting her earlier stance.

Gugu takes the initiative by abandoning her marriage to go and look for employment. She is hoping to be assisted by her old female schoolmate, Musa, a state registered nurse who is aware of Gugu's predicament. But Makhalisa denies Musa an opportunity to assist Gugu. On her arrival in Gweru, she finds that Musa is no longer staying at the address she had given her. She is left with no choice but to call on a male former schoolmate who eventually assists her to settle down, secure employment and eventually secure a place to train as a pre-school teacher. This does not empower women to feel that they are in a position to assist each other to get over their problems. By enabling women to do this, Makhalisa would have achieved what Carole Boyce-Davies (1986:35-36) calls true feminism:

True feminism is an abnegation of male protection and determination to be resourceful and reliant. The majority of Black women in Africa and the Diaspora have developed these characteristics, though not always by choice.

It is true that Makhalisa could be promoting mutual respect between the sexes, but one must not forget how literature can influence society. Women readers must get used to seeing women assisting each other, as it is in real life. Besides, it must not be forgotten that in many cases, when a man assists a woman, he does it for his own benefit. In the novel under discussion, Gugu eventually marries the man who assisted her to get over her problems.

In *Impilo Yinkinga*, the focus is still on good and bad women. The good woman is portrayed as the pillar of the family whereas the bad woman destroys the same. The story centers on the life of Ngonyama and his wife MaNsingo, affectionately referred to as MaMsie. Through the flashback technique, we get to know that Ngonyama had been so impressed with MaMsie's determination and potential that he had decided to marry her. The story, however, unfolds almost twelve years after their marriage and the reader is made aware that Ngonyama is a disappointed man. MaMsie has turned out to be a lazy, fun-loving woman, although her promiscuity is not easily explained. Ngonyama tries to correct her but fails. He then tries to divorce her but fails as well. Eventually, MaMsie quarrels with her boyfriend and when she tries to run

away from him, she is run over by a car and dies. Ngonyama has no regrets about her death.

The portrayal of MaMsie as a bad woman seems to be premised on the traditional perception that a woman marries in order to be looked after by her husband. Being looked after is seen from a materialistic point of view - a secure home, enough food and clothes, and having children.

MaMsie, on the other hand, complains that Ngonyama does not take her out to have a good time. He always complains of being tired and busy. As a result, she feels neglected and is only happy when she is with Joza, her boyfriend, who, however, is not as rich as Ngonyama. MaMsie's friends scorn her for expecting sexual satisfaction from her husband. Their reactions confirm what Gay Wilentz (1992:6) says about women and the oppression of women:

Revealingly, the voice of the community that demands adherence to strict social codes for its women often comes from women themselves. The paradox of this system, adding to the complexity of linguistical meaning in the novel, is that women often uphold traditions that limit their choices and rights as women.

Makhalisa wants the reader to believe that it is in Mamsie's nature to be promiscuous. This is confirmed when the writer reveals that MaMsie, as a girl, was morally weak. This then invalidates all the complaints that MaMsie has against Ngonyama. Instead, it reinforces the traditional view that married women should not expect sexual fulfillment from their husbands.

The writer fails to capitalize on the urban setting that she has chosen for her characters. How then does a housewife who is not employed spend her free time in a new environment with very limited space? MaMsie has domestic workers who take care of the housework. These are the new challenges that the reader expects the writer to interrogate because that is what confronts the urban woman today. It is not enough just to label her a bad woman. There is need to investigate the forces that shape her character.

The good women in this novel do not take adequate steps to challenge the unfavourable conditions in which they live. For instance, Joza's wife is a professional woman, who, although aware of her husband's infidelity, does nothing about it. She is content with making sure that she controls his pay. Again, the emphasis is on material aspects of marriage; the social and emotional aspects are ignored completely.

It is fair to conclude this section by pointing out that Makhalisa has not given the women enough will power to challenge the status quo. However, women need to realize that if they are to work towards self-empowerment, they should be in a position to voice what they desire and work together for the good of their communities.

### Doris Ndlovu in *Kusasa Kuyizolo*

Ndlovu has published one novel, *Kusasa Kuyizolo* (1980). Ethel, the daughter of Hlabangana and MaMlotshwa, is a high school student who falls in love with Ernest Hlongwane, another student at a neighbouring high school. When Ethel falls pregnant, Ernest refuses to marry her telling her that he still wants to continue with his education. Ethel remains in school until she writes her examinations. When she returns home, her mother's worry is that the school authorities should not know this so that Ethel continues with her education. She takes Ethel to her own home area where the latter gives birth to a baby girl. When she returns to her home, Ethel's mother pretends to be the mother of the newly born baby. So Ethel is able to go and train as a nurse in Durban. Meanwhile Ernest also proceeds to England where he trains as a doctor.

Ethel returns home and eventually gets married. Meanwhile her daughter, Hleziphi, now regarded by the community as her younger sister, goes to train as a nurse. She falls in love with an old doctor, Ernest Hlongwane, who works at the same hospital. Hlongwane believes that Hleziphi is Ethel's younger sister. However, when Hlongwane takes the move to initiate marriage, the truth comes to the open.

This story is again an illustration of the negative portrayal of women in Ndebele literature. Women are burdened with guilt while men remain free. The writer seems to suggest that African culture had a way of protecting young women from the predicament of pre-marital sex. Every young man who proposed love to a girl did so openly, and this enabled the girl's family to know him and assess his character. However, the new dispensation has changed things. Ethel meets Ernest at school and yet the school authorities are not in a position to protect them between school and home. Once a girl falls pregnant, the school authorities can no longer have her in their school system. Yet, without modern education, she would be condemned to perpetual poverty. This is the dilemma in which Ethel's mother finds herself when her daughter falls pregnant.

Ethel's grandmother explains to Ethel how, in the olden days, boys found it difficult to pressurize girls to engage in pre-marital sex. The writer,

regrettably, does not explore the fact that girls are now vulnerable because they get removed from the security of the home environment. This situation requires new approaches to the problem of pre-marital sex. In the novel in question, Ethel's mother is forced to cheat both her society and the school authorities for her daughter to complete her education. Later, she will have to deal with the true identity of Ethel's daughter, although she does not have plans for this eventuality. This is the dilemma that African women writers face that Sougou (2002:24) refers to when she says:

They are confronted with the implications of their need to liberate themselves from societal strictures and of societies grappling with imperialism.

It is for this reason that Ethel's mother should be seen as trying to confront the injustice imposed on women by the new dispensation. Women are made to bear the brunt of men's irrational behaviour of pressurizing women to have pre-marital sex, and then refuse to marry them. It is therefore unfortunate that the writer does not bring in a voice to challenge Ethel's father when he criticizes women for having no foresight as they fail to weigh the impact of their actions in the long run.

From the way the story is presented, it would be no surprise if Ethel's daughter gets angry with her mother and grandmother for not revealing her true identity than with her father, who dumped her mother. In the end, it is woman against woman while the men go free. There is need, therefore, for the female writer to give a balanced presentation of women's experiences so that women are not perceived as the wrong doers all the time. Ogundipe (1987:10) says this about the female writer:

She should be committed to her vision, whatever it is, which means she has to be willing to stand or to fall for that vision. She must tell her own truth, and write what she wishes to write. But she must be certain that what she is telling is the truth albeit her own truth. As already indicated, this is not coming through in Ndlovu's story.

### **Witchcraft in women's fiction**

This section examines the works of three women writers who portray black women as witches. They, however, fail to explain what pushes women to resort to such antisocial behaviour, as if to suggest that women are inherently evil. The three writers are Eunice Mthethwa in *Kutheni?* (1980), Leah Mazibuko in

*Umzenzi Kakhalelwa* (1982), and Sophie Sibanda in *Inxeba Lendoda Kalihlekwa* (1984).

In *Kutheni*, Ntombiyehlazo gets married to Ntongenihle knowing fully well that she is barren from the use of traditional contraceptives. Because her mother had hatched this plan, she is thus obliged to find ways of securing Ntombiyehlazo's marriage so that she is not divorced because of her barrenness.

The story focuses on the evil actions of these two women, particularly how Ntombiyehlazo's mother continues to practice more witchcraft to protect her daughter's marriage. Nowhere do we hear why Ntombiyehlazo's mother had to take such precautions in order to protect her daughter from pre-marital pregnancy. The writer fails to bring out that Ntombiyehlazo's mother is a victim of the expectations of her own society. While it strongly condemns pre-marital pregnancy, it does not provide ways of protecting young women like Ntombiyehlazo from the pressures of pre-marital sex. Individualism has long destroyed the traditional system of protecting young women from pre-marital sex. While girls are condemned for having children out of wedlock, boys who make these girls pregnant are viewed as heroes. For instance, when Ntongenihle's parents discuss his wife's childlessness, they are happy to refer to his affair with a Mpala girl that resulted in the birth of a child. They do not feel guilty about their son's behaviour, yet the Mpala girl is now an embarrassment to her family.

The argument advanced above equally applies to the bad women portrayed in Mazikubo's and Sibanda's novels. The unfavourable pressures exerted on women by society force them to use anti-social methods to defend and protect themselves. It is therefore important for writers to understand women's problems that emanate from their cultures so that they address those cultural impediments that disadvantage women. These cultural issues make women second-class citizens. Women writers, as Sougou (2002:23) puts it, 'carry a double yoke' of trying to change the views of their own societies about women, and of empowering women to play their new roles afforded them by the new dispensation.

### Eggie Makhalima

Finally, Eggie Makhalima's *Ukhethwe Yimi* (1987) attempts to change society's views on women by making male characters accept that since times have changed, young educated women can no longer be forced to marry old men. This view comes out clearly after a young female school teacher almost kills

herself in order to escape marrying a rich old man (he has a large herd of cattle). Her triumph in being allowed to marry a man of her own choice represents the triumph of all women. Society must respect their right to choose whom they want to marry, and also to have access to education without any restrictions.

While the writer may be applauded for making her central character stand for women's interests, this story may be read as an ethnic problem rather than a problem faced by African women in general. The central character, Buhle, is a Nguni girl, and the writer portrays the Nguni ethnic group as people who still take deep pride in their ethnic identity. There is no clear statement that girls are disadvantaged in this society. The writer makes the custom of arranged marriages appear to be a problem of girls who belong to the Nguni ethnic group only. It is important that female readers see Buhle as representing their interests as opposed to those of a particular ethnic group, as Sherry (1988:5) says:

Literature has many functions, but one thing that most readers look for in literature, at least some of the time, is some reflection of their own experiences. Similarly, if we feel that the experiences and perceptions reflected in a literary work are ones, which we can recognize, or at least understand and accept as human, we are likely to say the work is 'authentic' .

## Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that Ndebele female fiction writers are still under the strong influence of colonial culture that portrayed women as inferior to men. The colonial policy discriminated women by controlling their movement into urban areas, denying them access to employment and paying them less than men in situations where they were allowed to work. In this way, colonialism made women second-class citizens. Women writers need to confront this marginalization of women by empowering their female characters, who save as role models for other women. Such characters will make women feel that the sky is the limit for every citizen. Compared to men, women themselves are in a better position to do this as they will be writing from a female perspective and their voice would be more authentic than that of men.

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**Mickias Musiyiwa**

## **Introduction**

This chapter analyzes the thematic pre-occupations of Shona women poets of the colonial period whose poems appear in the anthologies of poetry published between 1969-1979. While it explores the varied concerns of their poetry, particular attention is paid to assessing the poets' consciousness of gender issues in the context of the realities of the colonial experience. In spite of the paucity of Shona women's poetry in comparison to their male counterparts, a close analysis of Shona written verse can detect distinct female voices whose audibility has slowly, but notably increased with the passage of time. The poetry is largely pre-occupied with issues regarding courtship and marriage, viewed from a Shona gender notion that centralizes the complementarity of men and women's roles and the stability of the family institution. This chapter argues that the concerns of the poets in question are better appreciated in the context of the Shona gender system that informs the poets' interpretation of gender relations within courtship and marriage. Also, central to this chapter is the examination of issues pertaining to African cultural identity against the backdrop of a servile colonial culture.

## **Theoretical approach**

The poetry is examined in the context of the dual-sex system gender theory. Propounded by Kamene Okonjo (1976) after her study of the gender relations of Igbo culture during the pre-colonial period, dual-sex theory sees Igbo society as based on separate and parallel political roles for men and women, accompanied by a gendered system of checks and balances. This system was based on the complementarity of the roles of men and women in everyday experiences. The mutual gender system was destabilized by the colonial system. Gender relations of pre-colonial Shona society, some of which survived the colonial onslaught, can to a large extent be conceptualized using Okonjo's model. Although there are only a few cases where Shona women could be chiefs, they were, however, key political functionaries with parallel but complementary duties. For instance, the origins of most Shona clans and dynasties are associated with a man and his sister. The sister was the keeper of

the dynasty's protective charms and also managed the behaviour of members of the clan, particularly its daughters (Aaron C. Hodza and George Fortune, 1979:15). She was also 'husband' to her brother's wives; she monitored their behaviour so that it conformed to the behavioural standards of the clan. To her brother's children she was *tete* (the paternal aunt), a role in which she also acted as 'father' to the same children. She was very knowledgeable of her clan ideology and would always be consulted in matters central to the clan's integrity, security and destiny. Similarly, to his sister's children, a Shona man played a motherly role. Thus, the roles that Shona men and women played were culturally symbolic and tailored to enable them achieve the multifarious needs of clan life. Every man and woman was recognized by his/her ability to fulfill his/her gender roles. The theory runs contrary to Schmidt's Eurocentric feminist analysis of Shona gender relations, which talks about 'the social invisibility of women' (1992:15), and also argues that Shona women 'influenced public affairs only indirectly' (*Ibid*:14). The fact that Shona society is patriarchal does not necessarily imply that its gender system serves only to entrench the interests of men while oppressing women. Both men and women complemented each other to serve the corporate interests of their clans. British colonialism upset and tilted the gender system through legislation which lowered the status of African women through the imposition of a colonialist culture inimical to indigenous cultures. European structures of patriarchal control based on Victorian ideals transformed Shona gender relations that culminated in the marginalization of indigenous women. Shona women poets react to these colonial experiences criticizing the (colonial) conditions that adversely affected gender relations among Shona people.

### **Shona women and creative writing during the colonial era**

The paucity of indigenous women's literature during this period is attributed to cultural, educational and institutional factors. The machinations of colonial capitalist ideology in its subtle guises entrenched a culture that excluded women from participating in both public affairs and their contemporary literary world. For instance, one Shona woman writer, Ketinah Muringaniza, testified that her husband was totally against her becoming a writer to the extent that he burnt her completed manuscript saying, 'I wasn't giving him due attention' (in Flora Veit-Wild, 1992:239). Molara Ogundipe-Lesslie also points out that women have more roles to perform which hinder their creative abilities. They have less time to prepare their writings; they spend time managing other people, their

husbands, children and visitors in addition to managing their own lives. 'Where a man can withdraw into a study room to write, a woman usually does not' (in Eldred D. Jones, 1987:72). Little or no education at all for the majority of Zimbabwean women is another contributing factor to the underdevelopment of women's literature in this period. Both colonial and African patriarchal beliefs combined forces to deprive women of education. African fathers were suspicious of providing their daughters with education, fearing that this would give them freedom to go into urban areas and abandon their conventional roles. The underlying reason for this uneasiness is, of course, the fact that some African men were afraid of losing the economic benefits associated with the marriage of their daughters.

The educational curriculum for Africans was also largely designed by Christian missionaries who believed that African girls were supposed to be given an education that was inferior to that offered to African boys. They were of the conviction that 'the objective of education for African girls was to mould them into proper mothers and teachers for young children and suitable wives for mission educated men...' (Elizabeth Schmidt, 1992:130). In a sense, the education most African women received was geared towards enabling women to manage the household, bear and raise healthy children and tend to, respect and also obey their husbands as humble and subservient wives. The challenges of creative writing would certainly interfere with these duties. Thus, the marriage between cultural and colonial factors explains the generally high rate of illiteracy among African women during the colonial period.

Other institutional factors also hampered the development of African women's literature in colonial Zimbabwe. For example, the Southern Rhodesia Literature Bureau (formed to promote the development of literature in indigenous languages) was biased against women's literature. As a colonial agency, the Bureau acted as a censorship body that would assess manuscripts by African writers and then approve or disapprove their publication. The institution was composed of male officials who had a bias against manuscripts written by women. One Shona woman novelist, Juliana Lwanda, was concerned that, 'men tend to regard women's ideas, writing or literary attempts as not worthwhile for public digestion' (in Flora Veit-Wild, 1992:239). Charles Mungoshi, one of the Bureau's assessors of the poems published in the Shona anthology of poetry, *Gwenyambira* (1979:10), admits how rigorous the selection was. There is no doubt therefore that due to these circumstances, many manuscripts by women could not exit the Bureau's offices on their way to the publishing house. For

instance, by 1987, only 15 women had managed to publish either a novel or a poem in Shona, while as many as 115 men had published works of literature in the same language (Flora Veit-Wild, *ibid*:355-60). Lastly, women's literature was retarded by lack of access to sources of information with regard to creative writing, which was exacerbated by deep-seated illiteracy.

### **Concerns of Shona women poets**

In order to fully appreciate the pre-occupations of Shona women poets of the colonial era, each poet will be analyzed separately, while a comparison with others in terms of authorial ideology will be made whenever necessary. The following anthologies will be analysed: *Mabvumira Enhetembo* (1969), *Nhetembo* (1972), *Nduri dzoRudo* (1978) and *Gwenyambira* (1979).

T. Mutongwizo is the only woman poet in the anthology *Mabvumira eNhetembo*. With a distinctive poetic style characterized by complex and covert metaphorical imagery, her love poems, 'Ronda remwoyo' (A wounded heart) and 'Chido chitaurirwa' (One's desire ought to be revealed) focus on the emotional side of courtship. The former laments the emotional pain a jilted girl goes through which, from the title of the poem, is metaphorically referred to as *ronda remwoyo* (a heart-ache). The rhetorical questions signify the jilted girl's emotional anguish as she grapples with the sudden twist in the relationship. In her second poem, Mutongwizo advises suitors to reveal their intentions to the women they love, so as to avoid emotional torment. However, men's lack of commitment as portrayed in this poem is generally not consistent with Shona courtship values. From courtship to marriage, the process was sequential, entailing, as it did, the involvement of key adult advisors (particularly the paternal aunt) for both the suitor and the maiden. Marriage was always a family's corporate responsibility. Thus, the depiction of courtship in which a suitor jilts his girl without plausible reasons is largely synonymous with the behavior of men in the colonial period. Colonialism engendered physical mobility and individualism which gave men latitude to have love relationships wherever they went in search of employment.

With nine poems to her credit, E. Mukunga is the second dominant Shona woman poet of the colonial era after M. Mushai who wrote eleven poems. Among her nine poems in *Nhetembo* (1972), three are love poems while the rest are didactic poems whose moralism targets women. The poem, 'Farisai mwana wandaida' (Farisai, the girl I loved so much), like Mutongwizo's poems, reflects the emotional anguish that sometimes characterizes courtship. A suitor's efforts

to woo a girl are fruitless. The suitor is so shattered that he decides to become a priest and devote his life to serving God:

Chawakandirambira chii, nhai Farisai?

Hawaingondiudza chandakakutadzira?

Kuenda kuna Yave kuti ndimuitire

Basa rake, regai ndipikire (77).

Why did you reject me, Farisai?

Why couldn't you tell me if I had wronged you?

I now have no other option

But to become to train as a priest and serve God

Mukunga manages to capture the interaction of men and women in traditional Shona courtship. Suitors tend to impress and win the sympathy of their beloved by exaggerating their love plight. According to J. Haasbroek (1978:175), the suitor's poetic prowess was necessary to help him shower his beloved with love rhetoric that would arouse sympathy and tender feelings to win the heart of the girl. The ability of the suitor to employ rhetoric garnished with jocular and witty persuasions and compliments is captured in the Shona proverb, *Rume risinganyepi hariroori* (A suitor who does not exaggerate his position before a girl will never marry). As Mukunga rightly depicts, in Shona culture there are many stories of suitors who spent all their life socially frustrated because the maidens they desired to marry rejected them.

Courtship had many challenges, as there were many considerations that maidens and suitors made before consenting. Some of the considerations were the family background and character of the suitor or girl. Mukunga mirrors the image of an ideal African woman. Every suitor was first struck by a maiden's physical beauty as embodied in the proverb, *Chinogutsa chinotange meso* (Satisfaction first strikes the eye), and would also be encouraged by her moral aptitude. Traditionally, *roora* was mainly paid in the form of cattle, therefore the seizure of African cattle as well as the enactment of legislations such as the Land Husbandry Act of 1957 which reduced the size of the herd of rural families, adversely affected the marriage institution. It became increasingly difficult for fathers to pay *roora* for their sons. In the poem, Farisai might have found her suitor penurious and incapable of paying *roora* for her. Successful marriage negotiations also benefited the woman as it enabled the couple to be issued

with a marriage certificate which would give her a right to reside in an urban area if her husband was employed there. Thus, Mukunga illustrates how the colonial condition adversely transformed gender relations in courtship.

In 'Ndakadyiwa naSarah' (Sarah swindled me), Mukunga again criticizes the colonial condition for the negative transformation of Shona women's behaviour. The colonial economy destroyed the African family as a unit of economic production. This resulted in Africans leaving their families in search of employment in urban, mining and commercial farm areas. The demotion of women from major to minor citizens, contributed to their turning to prostitution as a way of sustaining themselves. To Mukunga, this social illness had profound negative repercussions, for it contributed to the destruction of the African family. Employed African men easily fell prey to urban seductresses and prostitutes who lured them to spend their money in futile pleasure of beer and sex. In the process, they forgot their families. Mukunga therefore, attacks colonialism for creating moral decadence, which tore the moral fabric of Shona society. By depicting nothing praiseworthy from unmarried urban women, Mukunga laments how colonialism alienated African men and women from their gender system, which was based on mutual interaction. Although Mukunga may be criticized for her stereotypical denigration of colonial African urban women as prostitutes, the conditions within which the women lived must be given primary consideration in explaining the new behavioural patterns.

'Vhudzi' (Hair) lampoons how Africans, particularly women, treat their hair. They burn it with hot stones in an attempt to straighten it. Mukunga is concerned that such methods of treating hair not only pollute the home environment because of the smell of burning hair, but that they are also an imitation of western hairstyles. Women are also ridiculed for putting on wigs, which she likens to a filthy hat made out of a cat skin. Mukunga criticizes the fashion of the 1960s and 1970s characterized by wigs, the Afro-hair style, skin-lightening lotions and other so-called modern appearance enhancement cosmetics and fashions. The fact that the persona largely faults women vis-à-vis fashion dramatizes the enthusiasm with which African women acquired western habits as compared to their male counterparts. She sees such habits as destroying African identity.

'Tsamba' (Letter) satirizes African women for using modern methods of communication to undermine Shona courtship values. A young woman falls in love with two suitors and writes letters to each of them pretending to be committed to both. The persona believes that such a girl would never have a

stable marriage. She is giddy and lacks the commitment and sincerity required in courtship. She resembles what in Shona is referred to as a *wata-wata* (morally feeble young woman), lampooned in the Shona *mbira* song, 'Wata-wata', which calls upon young men to steer clear of such girls.

In the poem, 'Mudiwa wangu' (My lover), Mukunga celebrates traditional Shona courtship. Even if colonialism forced lovers to stay apart, they must still be committed to each other:

Hapana anokwanisa kutiparadzanisa  
Chete ziva kuti hapana munhu asina mhandu  
Pana vamwe vanokudawo ini vachindisema  
Iniwozve vamwe vanondida vachindishayiwa (83).

No one can separate us  
Be aware that everyone has an enemy  
There are some who love you while hating me  
And there are some who like me but they fail to win my love.

In 'Sadza' (*Sadza* is a traditional staple food of the Shona people), Mukunga argues that this traditional food stabilizes African families. She criticizes housewives who prefer western foodstuffs, which she believes, are not as satisfying:

Mwana womutema ukamupa tudyo  
Tunonaka ukasamupa sadza ipapo,  
Dumbu rinoguta asi mwoyo ugere (85).

If you give a black person all sorts of delicious food  
Without giving him *sadza*  
His stomach is filled but not his soul.

Because of the centrality of *sadza* in stabilizing Shona families, Mukunga advises women to work hard to increase agricultural output. As in 'Vhudzi', she attacks Africans for abandoning their nutrition in servile pursuits of western nutrition, which does not meet the African's nutritional and dietary needs. The importance of the theme of the poem also lies in the fact that it recognizes the critical contribution of African women in agricultural production. Women were,

and still are, pivotal in Shona agricultural production. In traditional Shona society, a family's agricultural production was measured against its ability to produce grain, so critical to its food security. A lazy woman, as is the case with a lazy man, was and still is highly scorned in Shona culture. Family stability and gender harmony were only achieved by spouses who worked hard and complemented each other's roles.

The powerfully didactic poem, 'Gezai musvinure mese vakadzi' (Wake-up all you women), projects Mukunga's vision of the socio-economic and gender problems bedeviling indigenous women in colonial Zimbabwe. The title of the poem is an awakening call for African women to be aggressive in order to counter the unfavourable conditions brought upon them by white settlers. A similar call is captured decades later in Barbara Makhala's *Vus*, *Inkophe* (1996). Women ought to broaden their consciousness through education and writing, as well as acquire skills and survival strategies that will enable them to make a decent living. Their obsession with western trivialities such as physical beauty, sweet foodstuffs and other trinkets will destroy them:

Saka urozvi hwenyu husingfungi kwazvo,  
Mapedza kupisa vhudzi nenyama yomusoro  
Tsve kuita mabasa anotendwa nevanhu,  
Swere renyu basa rokunanzva magaba ejamu,  
Nokutevera varume vana vakadzi vavo (86-87).

That is why you cannot use your brains to think logically  
You burn your hair and heads trying to look attractive  
Then you forget to do important jobs that are appreciated by society.  
You waste time looking for and eating sweet foodstuffs,  
And pursuing married men in order to prostitute with them.

Emmanuel M. Chiwome (1996:83) applauds Mukunga for making such a bold statement which 'encourages women to broaden their aspirations beyond the home and the mirror in order to fit into the competitive world of colonial Zimbabwe'. Mukunga's central point is that as long as African women are hesitant to further their education, they will not think critically and be conscious of their capabilities and how to utilize them. She warns women not to chase superficial and servile things brought by Europeans as they worsen their already adverse socio-economic and gender conditions. Although this is not apparent

in the poem, she is also indirectly criticizing the colonial education system which was biased against African women. There were very limited opportunities for girls to pursue advanced academic work; the majority could only train as teachers, nurses and nuns (Elizabeth Schmidt, 1996:132). The poem latently attacks colonial authorities with their brand of Victorian patriarchy that was practised and reinforced by Christian missionaries.

In terms of quantity, M. Mushai is the most prolific of the pioneers of Shona female poetry. Her poems are found in *Nhetembo* and *Gwenyambira*. In the former anthology, her depiction of courtship in poems such as, ‘Rudo’ (Love) and ‘Nhai iwe mudiwa wangu’ (My beloved) is celebratory. However, in the latter anthology her tone and mood become more critical. In ‘Nhai iwe mudiwa wangu’, the persona admits her servitude to love. The poem is dominated by romantic and erotic imagery which indicates how the persona sentimentalizes her devotion to her beloved. The physical separation of lovers that Mushai laments in this poem negatively impacted on gender relations in courtship. This was a threat to the stability of love relationships. The following stanza illustrates this point:

Iwe wandopinda naye muгуva ukandikanganwa,  
Woti vamarokwe mudhorobhomо isaruraude,  
Chokwadi mudiwa uri kuti bvo-o wangu mwoyo (113).

My lover who I love to the grave,  
If you fall in love with other women in town,  
Darling, surely you will deeply hurt me.

In ‘Dekadza mwoyo wangu’ (Make me happy), like Mukunga, Mushai celebrates Shona courtship values. The poem depicts the emotional anxiety of a suitor as he perseveres to win the love of a maiden he so desires, yet the maiden appears reluctant to respond. Traditionally, any girl who immediately accepted a suitor’s proposals was regarded as morally weak, and sometimes it could take a suitor up to two years to win the heart of his desired maiden (Jairos M. Gombe, 1998:64). A maiden’s behaviour during courtship is depicted in Moderkai Hamutyinei’s humorous courtship poem, ‘Kana wamutanga musikana’ (When courting a girl) in *Mabvumira Enhetembo* (1969: 17-18) and *Nhaka yeNhetembo* (1996:127-8). Mushai, like Mukunga, is also lamenting the erosion of Shona courtship procedures by western cultural values.

Although the poem, 'Hari Dzofanzirofa' bemoans the physical passivity associated with old age, it could also be taken as an allegory of the waning of Shona traditional values in the face of the western cultural invasion. As old people reflect on their past experiences with nostalgia, so does the poet on her culture's fast changing norms. At a personal level, as someone who appears to have been so immersed in the joys of courtship, Mushai was probably worried about realizing its transitoriness.

In *Gwenyambira*, Mushai deviates from the celebratory tone that garnishes her courtship poetry in *Nhetembo* to a critical, melancholic and regretful one, lamenting the demise of marriage values. She criticizes colonialism for weakening African men's commitment to marriage, thereby worsening marital problems, particularly, sexual irresponsibility and divorce. Of interest are the stereotypical images like, *Varume havatani kufinhwa* (Men easily lose interest, i.e. in women) and also, *Varume vanoita sevana vadiki* (Men behave like children), implying that they are easily fascinated by trivialities. 'Ndiani achada kurima gura?' (What man would want to marry a divorcee?) criticizes men for divorcing or neglecting their wives in pursuit of other women. The persona regrets the fantasy and romance of courtship for having blinded her from forecasting what would happen to her marriage:

Ndakave bofu ndambundirwa norudo;  
Ndakatsindirwa rzeve ndikave matsu nerudo;  
Handina kuziva kuti rudo iruva rinosvava, (115)

Love made me blind;  
Love made me deaf and mute;  
I didn't know that your love is like a flower that wilts.

Mushai is concerned that the consequences of divorce or wife neglect are more devastating on a woman than a man. While a man has a good chance of remarrying, women are not equally privileged. The persona likens the plight of a divorced or neglected wife to an abandoned piece of land whose fertility has been exhausted through repeated agricultural use. As a farmer clears and prepares a *gombo* (virgin land) for planting crops and abandons it to look for another, so are the actions of some men when dealing with women:

Wakabatira gombo, wakapisa mavivi ukariodza negeyo

Gombo richisina kudya wakabatira rimwe,...

Ndiani zvino achada kurima gura? (115)

You ear-marked virgin land, cleared it and burnt the trees and ploughed it

When the piece of land's fertility was exhausted, you earmarked another one,...

But now who would like to farm an over utilized piece of land?

Mushai's analogical reasoning conveyed in the imagery of this poem attacks some men for sexual exploitation of women. Traditionally, among the Shona, *bonde* (sexual intercourse) was a religious act, hence the recitation of each other's clan praises by a wife and husband during lovemaking. The increase in men's (and indeed women's) sexual irresponsibility is largely a colonial social phenomenon. Colonial labour policies, the cash economy, industrialization and urbanization all contributed to desecrating the *bonde* process' religio-cultural symbolism.

The problem of divorce that Mushai also laments became a common social problem during the colonial era. In traditional Shona society, divorce was rare because one's marriage was also a responsibility of the entire (extended) family. The only justifiable grounds for divorce were when it was proved beyond any reasonable doubt that a married woman was a witch. Such cases like a wife being an adulteress (although adultery was strongly condemned), were not strong grounds for divorce as is evident in the Shona saying, *Gomba harina mwana* (An extra-marital companion cannot claim paternity to a child he fathered with another man's wife). Mushai's poem is therefore a reminder to Shona men to perform their conjugal roles as expected in the Shona culture's gender system.

Like Mushai's poem in *Gwenyambira*, Mahamba is also keen on exposing the moral weaknesses of men in both courtship and marriage. This she reveals in 'Tora chisaga ukandire' (Abondon your morally feeble suitor) and 'Pfuma kumukadzi wechipiri' (Squandering family wealth to marry a second wife). In the former, the speaker assumes the role of the Shona traditional moralist advising her friend to reconsider her commitment to a morally bankrupt suitor. The poet subjects him to comic buffoonery to show that he cannot be a responsible husband in marriage. Mahamba's casting of a critical eye on suitors should not be taken as a feminist stance. Like her colleagues, she is merely a

moralist. Both men and women who negate mutual gender relations are condemned. Thus, one was expected to choose a partner with sober habits, a good image in the community and who could interact with others harmoniously. In 'Pfuma kumukadzi wechipiri' (Squandering family wealth to marry a second wife), Mahamba condemns the failure by some men to run their polygamous families to the satisfaction of their wives and children. They destroy the family's wealth by marrying more wives without considering the consequences of their actions. In the poem in question, a child laments that before his father married a second wife, *pamusha pairira ngoma* (176) (relationships in the home were harmonious). But now there are divisions and hatred among family members:

Ko zvandisisina baba ndichaendepi?

Barika ravapeta mwoyo kunge chambwa (176).

Where will I go now that my father no longer likes me?  
Polygamy has made his heart recoil.

Mahamba is not against a polygamous family as an institution, but blames those men who cannot run it as expected culturally, and thus fail to maintain gender harmony and family stability.

In Shona culture, polygamous families were considered important as they would increase the population of a clan and thus ensure social and economic security. A woman married in a polygamous family had her own responsibilities to execute for the good of the family. She had access to her own piece of land so that she could grow crops to feed her children. However, if a husband was irresponsible as is the case in the poem, the family could encounter a series of predicaments. One of these problems is *gadzingai* (intense hatred that originates from co-wives as they compete for the husband's love, and spreads to their children thereby creating permanent hostile camps and factions in the family). Worse still, a polygamous family was breeding ground for *uroyi* (witchcraft), which could be used to harm others when conflicts become confrontational. Mahamba's sentiments are also echoed by Joyce Simango in her novel, *Zviuya Zviri Mberi* (1974), in which a polygamous man is derided for intending to marry a fifth wife by pledging his nine-year old daughter when in reality, he is failing to economically satisfy the existing four wives and their children.

Shona love poetry also includes the poetry of married couples. It contrasts courtship poetry by virtue of its diminished mellifluous language. It is largely dominated by a melancholic tone as husband and wife complain about each other or the other's shortcomings that hinder the attainment of a sustainable conjugal interaction. Congruent to Mahamba, H. Sithole in 'Kana kuri kuwanikwa wanikwai mogā' (If you decide to marry I will never emulate you) blames irresponsible men for making a woman's life miserable in marriage. In this poem, men who have temporary commitment to marriage; who are covetous, and do not get satisfaction from their wives; who are insensitive to their wives' emotional concerns and who expect women to sympathize with them and forgive them while they do not reciprocate, have no place in Shona culture's gender system. However, to a husband and wife who are conscious of their roles, marriage is enjoyable as Ratidzai P. Chiwara's 'Gadzi rangu chipondamwoyo' (My big sweet wife) depicts.

## Conclusion

The chapter has attempted an analytical exploration of the thematic inclination of Shona women poets who wrote in the last decade of the colonial period. Due to cultural, educational and institutional reasons which led to the paucity of literary works by women writers, it may be difficult to discern what we may refer to as a women's perspective towards the condition of African women during the colonial period. However, despite this, their poetic voice is audible enough to comment on the largely negative impact of western/colonial values on indigenous gender relations.

When approached and conceptualized from the dual-sex gender theory, the Shona women poets lament the destruction of their culture's gender system at the hands of a (western) colonialist culture. Consequently, some depict Shona traditional courtship with deep-rooted nostalgia. They lampoon African women for imitating servile colonial attitudes and habits which only serve to efface their cultural identity and integrity.

As they yearn for gender harmony, they also criticize the moral weakness of both men and women as it endangers family stability. While women must desist from certain habits which stereotype them, such as gossip, prostitution and obsession with western superficial fashion and foodstuffs, men must equally desist from being covetous and unfaithful in marriage. It has been argued that examining Shona women poets' concerns from western feminist sensibilities will lead to erroneous conclusions as these poets do not

seek autonomy and the destruction of their culture's gender structures. Rather, they recognize that men and women in society are mutually dependent, and as such, are compelled to fulfill their complementary roles that enhance gender harmony and family stability.

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## Samukеле Hadebe

### Introduction

The story of the drama text *Umhlaba Lo!* (1977) reflects a society trapped in two contradictory value systems. On the one hand, there are values and practices that are vestiges of traditional Ndebele society that seem to have succumbed to the pressure of modern life (as opposed to the Ndebele traditional one), and on the other, a mixture of Christian and western values and practices all conditioned by the colonial environment prevailing then. Although the two value systems are by nature contradictory, there is a common thread that runs through both, that is, the oppression of women. The writer decides to use the story of a lone fight by a young woman to show the trials and tribulations that women in the colonial period went through, especially in urban areas.

### The narrative

The main setting of the story is in the city of Bulawayo, although the story begins in a rural setting. The main character, Sibonile, has just completed her secondary education, but cannot secure a vacancy to train either as a teacher or a nurse in spite of her having passed well. It seems there is only one option available to her, that is, going to the city in search of employment.

Sibonile faces serious challenges in pursuit of this option. The first hurdle to overcome is her father, Nduku, who will hear nothing of it. Nduku is concerned about what he perceives to be the immorality of urban life, and does not want his daughter to be part of it. His major concern is the problem of accommodation which he sees as the key cause of the immorality that prevails in the city.

After overcoming Nduku's resistance through intense lobbying by her mother, MaNyoni, and also her grandmother, Sibonile is confronted by more complex challenges in the city. Because of the problems of unemployment, Sibonile fails to get a job as fast as she had hoped, especially since she has no profession or trade. As a result, she has to depend on relatives for her needs. One such relative is her uncle, Zenzo, who lives in the high density suburb of

Mpopoma. Zenzo's wife, Masuku, illtreats Sibonile and deliberately frustrates her plans of getting a job.

As Sibonile goes through the trying times of deprivation, joblessness and a hostile reception at her uncle's home, she also faces equally problematic situations socially. Her new friend, Lulu, advises her to get a boyfriend to take care of her material and financial needs. Lulu even tries to introduce Sibonile to a life of drinking alcohol and other untoward activities of urban youths. Sibonile manages to stand her ground and refuses to be swayed by the flirtations of city life. The continued bad treatment at Zenzo's home and failure to get employment lead her to seek alternative accommodation at aunt Zandile's place, where she unfortunately gets into even more complicated problems. Zandile arranges that she has love affairs with older married men. To compound Sibonile's many trials, Zandile's husband, Ndaba, also proposes love to her. This drives Sibonile out of her aunt's place and, as a result, she becomes homeless in addition to being jobless.

When she cannot stay with either of her relatives, Sibonile then seeks shelter at Lulu's place. As already mentioned, Lulu and her friends are women of loose morals. Eventually, Sibonile gets employed by the elderly Magaya who has an infamous reputation for sexually abusing his women employees. Sibonile is not exempt from Magaya's sexual harassment. Lulu tries various tricks to lure Sibonile to her bad ways but to no avail. She even tries to break up Sibonile and Mbonisi's affair. Lulu prefers Jeff to Mbonisi, although the former turns out to be an unemployed thief.

Through sheer determination, consistency and strict adherence to good principles and Christian values, Sibonile emerges triumphant. She finally marries her chosen boyfriend, Mbonisi, and the play ends with a happy ending.

### **Depiction of Ndebele traditional practices**

The writer shows through her story that some aspects of traditional Ndebele customs and beliefs are oppressive to women. Like many societies the world over, traditional Ndebele society was patriarchal, with the husband wielding much power in family affairs. It appears the writer is showing the weaknesses of the seemingly absolute power in the male head of the family. For example, Nduku does not want to let his daughter, Sibonile, go and seek employment in town although his wife, MaNyoni, and his mother, both see the advantages of Sibonile being employed. Nduku says:

## Nxa uSibonile esekhulile kasendi ngani ngilobolise? (14)

If Sibonile is grown up why does she not get married so that I get *lobola* (bridewealth)?

The view expressed by Nduku can be interpreted as one case of commodification of women by the patriarchal tradition, through the practice of *lobola*. Daughters are valued mostly for the bridewealth that they will secure for their fathers and brothers upon marriage.

When Ndaba makes sexual advances to Sibonile, he justifies his behaviour by appealing to the traditional Ndebele practice of *ukulamuza* (marrying the younger sister or niece of one's wife). He says to her:

Wena uyintombi yami. Angizange ngikugaqele ngamadolo kwabakini, nguwe owazazendela koyihlokazi (39).

You are my girlfriend. I did not come to beg you from your parents; it's you who came here on your own to join your aunt in marriage.

From Ndaba's behaviour, the writer seems to be admonishing Ndebele society for denying women the right to choice. Polygamy (*isithembu*) is shown as a male practice to quench the sexual ego of men. For example, Ndaba's wife, Zandile, is not even consulted when her husband decides to marry a second wife. This means that the practice of polygamy does not take into consideration the feelings of the wife whose husband is marrying another woman. The attack on polygamy is also reflected when Mbizo proposes love to Sibonile. When Sibonile asks him what his wife would say on hearing about his love proposal to her, Mbizo responds by saying that Sibonile should forget about the wife because she does not matter at all. According to this interpretation of polygamy, a husband could marry a second wife without regard to the feelings of his first wife, and in some cases, could not even consult her. Actually, Ndaba even says that since his wife is old, he therefore needs a younger woman. In that way, women are treated as if they were objects to be used and disposed of when old. The same cannot be done to men. Tradition has robbed women of equal dignity and choice with men, thus reducing the former to be appendages of the latter. Also, through the *ukulamuza* custom, the young woman has no choice. She is told that she automatically belongs to a certain man by virtue of that man

having married her sister or aunt. So at the end of the day, none of the women has a choice.

The traditional Ndebele society portrayed in the play is based on male dominance and respect of age. This disregards one's abilities and wisdom. During the family gathering to prepare for marriage negotiations, Nduku's elder brother is given the first opportunity to make his suggestions. Every time he makes a contribution, women are not pleased by his obviously foolish proposals. However, because of his age and the fact that he is male, he plays a more important role in clan matters even when it is obvious that he lacks the ability to make wise decisions. The writer seems to be suggesting that Ndebele society is doing itself a disservice by prioritizing men and age rather than progressive ideas regardless of the age and sex of the person propounding them. Although in traditional Ndebele society women were not passive participants in *lobola* matters, their influence was minute when compared to that of men. The bride's opinion on her *lobola* was never sought; only her mother, grandmother and aunts were consulted.

Let it be emphasized again that the writer selects those aspects from traditional Ndebele society that have permeated contemporary practices and hence created problems. The drama text should not be seen as a critique of Ndebele culture in general, but aspects of certain customs that continue to hold sway when in fact they are obsolete. This opinion does not in anyway imply that the philosophical foundations of Ndebele life should not be subjected to scrutiny. For instance, traditional practices like *lobola*, polygamy and *ukulamuza* that are depicted in this play cannot be said to be reflective of principles governing Ndebele life. These are general practices found in most pre-industrial societies, and their continued relevance is now subject to debate.

### **The conflicting value systems**

It was alluded to in the introduction that the Ndebele society depicted in this drama text is one at crossroads, as it is caught in between two worlds. There is no clear-cut value system that is predominant. The traditional Ndebele value system appears anachronistic under the changed circumstances.

For instance, when Nduku and MaNyoni decide where Sibonile can stay in Bulawayo, MaNyoni believes that her brother, Zenzo, has an obligation to keep Sibonile. Her assumption is premised on the fact that Zenzo has been the beneficiary of the *lobola* paid on her marriage to Nduku. He therefore is

duty bound by tradition to take care of his sister's children should the need arise. MaNyoni says:

UZenzo nguye owadla amalobolo ami. Angayekela umntanami elamba, elala emaphayiphini ngaliphi? (16).

Zenzo is the one who benefited from my brideprice. On what grounds would he let my child to starve and sleep on the streets?

The reality of the day does not reflect the assumptions held by MaNyoni. Sending Sibonile to her uncle Zenzo leads to a hostile reception from Zenzo's wife who cannot accept a dependent in her household.

Another area of Ndebele life that was affected by the changed circumstances are the belief systems. The introduction of a mass religion like Christianity which differed from the Ndebele traditional religion led to conflicting value systems. For example, some people in the Ndebele society still attribute luck to ancestral spirits, as depicted through Sibonile's grandmother:

UJesu lowo yena nguye ozakwenzani lapho okwahluleka khona amadlozi?...Mhlawumbe ngabaphansi asebezondile. Angithi loyihlomkhulu kabuyiswanga ngenxa yobuKristu benu lobo osebalingenka kubi; liqilwa ngezinye izizwe nje! (11).

What will that Jesus do where the ancestral spirits have failed?...Maybe the departed are angry. Remember that even the spirit of your grandfather has not been brought back home because of your Christianity, when the truth of the matter is that you are being cheated by other nations!

The introduction of Christianity among the Ndebele has resulted in a number of problems. The Ndebele people are now divided between church followers and non-believers. To complicate issues further, there are some who, although they claim to be Christians, still cling to their traditional beliefs even if the two systems seem to be conflicting. This has not helped the condition of women in Ndebele society. Both traditional Ndebele belief systems and Christian practices are patriarchal and they chain women in servitude to men. In any case, religion

is part of culture and it cannot be practised in isolation to the underlying socio-economic conditions prevailing in a given society.

One area of the Ndebele way of life that has been adversely affected by new practices ushered in by colonial and Christian influence is marriage customs, especially *lobola*. Due to intermarriages with different cultural and language groups, as well as the cash economy as opposed to the traditional system based largely on cattle, *lobola* has become so commercialized to the extent that there is no consensus among the Ndebele as to how much *lobola* should be demanded and what form it should take.

First, there is a problem of what to charge, that is, in terms of *isivulamlomo* (payment to initiate talks), *ukangaziwe* (payment to seek acceptance), and the provision of blankets and jackets for in-laws. It would seem there is no agreement as to which of these practices were original to Ndebele people. There seems to be no yardstick to follow and, besides, the monetary value system is constantly changing, unlike when the value was estimated in terms of a certain number of beasts. By depicting this confusion, the writer seems to suggest that Ndebele society is trapped in an obsolete practice whose relevance today is questionable. The writer does not put this explicitly, but she triggers these questions in the mind of her readers.

Second, there is the problem of how much to demand as payment for *lobola*. The problem is compounded by the fact that people are trying to follow both the customary practice and the new practices. For example, traditionally, *lobola* was in the form of cattle, and the number of cattle was generally standard. However, nowadays it is difficult to determine the price of each beast because people rarely use cattle as payment but the money equivalent. Logically, the equivalent should be the commercial value of cattle. Few people would be able to raise even a tenth of the *lobola* if the conversion of the value of cattle were to follow prevailing commercial rates. That brings us to the third problem: should *lobola* be a token of, or the actual value to compensate for the departure of one's daughter?

The traditional significance of *lobola*, which among other things, was being a token of appreciation, legitimizing the marriage and legalizing the offspring, seems to be under attack from the new value system. Whether *lobola* is merely a token dictated by customary practice, or strictly financial and material compensation for the loss of revenue and labour through marriage; estimating the monetary value of a human being is not only undesirable but impossible. Some people argue that paying *lobola* is as good as purchasing a woman,

while others believe that *lobola* serves to legalize the children. In both instances, there is no known value of the service a woman renders to her husband. Traditionally, the Ndebele believed that *lobola* is meant to facilitate the union of the two families spiritually. It should be noted that even departed members of the families are believed to be playing relevant roles in the lives of the living, and hence the appeasement of ancestral spirits. Nduku's brother says:

Kodwa phela singambizela okuphansi kakhulu umkhwenyana, abanye bona bebizelwa okuzwayo aliboni yini badala ukuthi uzasuka azibuze ngentombi yakhe le ukuthi ingumuntu onjani obizelwa okuphansi?...Loba ingaze ibe phansi kakhulu, angajinge adutshwe umntwana, azithole esehlezi phezu kwensimbi evuthayo. Sibe satholani-ke ngokubabizela okulutshwana? Umntwana lo wahlutshekela kakhulu kusukela (78).

If we charge our son-in-law a little amount yet others are charging lots, don't you think he will start asking himself why so little was charged for his girlfriend?...Even if less is charged, our daughter might still find herself ill-treated in marriage. What then would have been our benefit for charging them less? It has been very costly to bring up this child.

From the above quotation it would seem that *lobola* is not merely a token but some form of compensation on the part of the woman's family. The mention of the costly upbringing of Sibonile is a way of showing that all those costs should be repaid by the would-be husband. As already mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, it is worth noting that the bride has no say in all these charges, buttressing the outrageous claim often made that *lobola* is tantamount to selling women. The custom of *lobola* still continues as society believes that it is part of Ndebele culture or African culture. Commenting on the subtle nature of culture, Kanyoro (1995:18) writes that, 'Often culture is something subconscious, so ingrained in us that we do not hear or see ourselves within our cultural skin'. Because of this powerful grip of culture on our minds, usually what is perceived to be cultural is rarely questioned. Even patriarchy is not perceived as an injustice to women but as part of culture. Writing on patriarchy, Ortega (1995:x) says:

Linked with global economic injustice that has systematically marginalized and destroyed the life and livelihood of millions of people, particularly women and children, patriarchy has been a formidable force silencing women and rendering them invisible in all spheres of life.

Makhala seems to be questioning some of the practices and customs of patriarchal societies that are responsible for reducing women to perpetual subservience to men.

### The portrayal of urban life

The city in *Umhlaba Lo!* has been portrayed as a dangerous place to live in, a place where immorality and a life of debauchery rule the day. Unfortunately, the reasons for this state of affairs are never brought out. According to Mungoshi (1990:5),

The city was the villain, in most of our stories, and not the white man who had brought the town into our rural lives... We wrote of our own lives as if the white man didn't exist.

Views cited below about the city by both rural and urban people substantiate Mungoshi's quotation.

Gogo: Ngibuba ngoba idolobho leli liyaxhwalisa...Nanguyana umfokaMagwaza esefakwe entilongweni iminyaka emithathu ngobusela lobugebenga, ekhuthuza abazinqela izithukuthuku zabo. Ayisuye lo owayelunge okwemvu, esesekhaya? KoBulawayo le akuyi olubuyayo!  
(10)

I am asking because the city corrupts...Remember the son of Magwaza who has been sentenced to three years in jail because of criminal activity, stealing other people's hard earned money. Wasn't he a humble and upright person when he was still here in the rural area? There is no one who can escape the corrupting influence of Bulawayo.

MaNyoni: Bayalitsho phela idolobho leli. Lisuka lenwaye abantu ebuchotsheni, kucine umuntu kungasemuntu. Lawe-ke usuzafika ubelunwabu khonale (18).

Lots of bad things have been said about the city. The city corrupts people and drains their morality. You also will be corrupted there.

Lulu: KukoBulawayo lapha. Khona uzamthatha ngaphi owakho wedwa? (27).

This is Bulawayo. In any case, where will you get a lover you will not share?

The expression *KukoBulawayo lapha* (This is Bulawayo) is frequently used when characters in the story are justifying their immoral and illegal activities. Any Ndebele person would easily understand the circumstances in which the expression is used. Jeff uses the same expression when he admits that he makes a living through pick-pocketing and gambling. When Sibonile asks Mbizo and Magaya why they want to propose love to her when they are married family men, both answer, '*KukoBulawayo lapha*'.

Makhalisa's portrayal of the city is in line with the colonial ideology of that period. The city was meant to be home for the whites settlers while Africans were only to come to the city temporarily as cheap labour. It was as if those who came to the city got corrupted because they were morally weak. It is never mentioned that only the city had the resources and facilities denied the countryside. Employment was in the cities, so were roads, electricity, industries, piped water, hospitals, schools and other recreational facilities. Africans were not supposed to enjoy the benefits of the city. Their role was to provide cheap labour and, upon retirement, they had to return to their poverty-stricken rural homes. This dualization of homes was bad enough for men who at least had wives to take care of homes while they were away in urban areas. Women could not work in the cities since they were expected to remain with children in the rural areas. Formally employed women risked not being married, and some of those who managed to get married were usually forced either by their husbands or in-laws to quit their jobs and take care of their rural homes. According to Nkabinde (1999:9):

The blacks had already suffered far more physical damage with the rural urban drift and its attendant dislocatory effects. The very cultural adjustment was in itself traumatic. The Ndebele took to the urban

centre most of his rural culture and was very often surprised – and pained – at the incongruity some of his timeless habits created in the new environment

However, the writer does not reflect the underlying causes of the problems they encountered in the city, instead she blames her characters for lack of strong morals. Although she highlights the circumstances that drive the youth to the city, she does not explore the original factors conditioning such circumstances. One would expect the writer to depict the alienating conditions of the city and the culture shock in the Ndebele mind.

Through the life story of Sibonile, the writer succeeds to an extent in portraying the physical conditions that drive young people from their rural homes to the city. Sibonile says:

Angimsoli ubaba ngoba ngiyazi ukuba uthwele nzima ngabanawami laba abasesikolo. Lemali yesikolo ilokhu ikhwela iminyaka yonke, ikanti lezinkomo ziyaqunywa (10).

I do not blame my father because I know the burden he has to shoulder with my young brothers and sisters still at school. School fees is increasing annually yet there is de-stocking.

The conditions created by the colonizers in the rural areas were dehumanising due to abject poverty. Young people found themselves trapped in the abyss of this poverty and deprivation. Although some might even have done well at secondary school examinations, they could not get vacancies to train as teachers or nurses, the only professions available for Africans then. The colonial education policy created bottlenecks in order to admit only a few who would help in the civil service. The majority were left to join the large army of the jobless. Such a situation was favourable to the colonial system because it reduced the cost of labour as there was a large pool to draw cheap labour from.

As very few were absorbed in the job market, the majority had to survive by any means available. The city is generally an expensive place to live in compared to the rural environment. Money is needed for food, clothing, accommodation, transport, fuel, medication and recreation. Besides, some money must be sent back to the rural home to support the poor families left behind.

Even the few who managed to get jobs could not manage meeting all their needs as the wages were very low. Lulu says:

Ucabanga ukuthi amadola alitshumi engiwazuza ngaboLwesihlanu angangifikisa ngaphi? Kumele umuntu azame amanye amaqhinga (25).

Do you think the ten dollars I get every Friday can take me anywhere?  
One must devise plans to supplement this meagre income.

Crime is a result of lack of adequate material and financial resources. Men resort to robbery, theft and gambling while women resort to prostitution.

One major problem in the city is lack of accommodation. Urban areas like Bulawayo built during colonial days had no permanent homes for blacks. Actually, hostels were built to accommodate mainly male labourers. Their wives and children were initially not catered for. This meant that women were designated to the poverty stricken countryside. The colonial set up worsened the conditions of black women who were already marginalized by the patriarchal traditional society. African women who managed to get to towns either found themselves jobless or lowly paid. In most cases, they found themselves without proper accommodation, thereby driving them into prostitution.

Unfortunately, the writer does not explore the conditions that corrupt urban youths. Although she depicts vividly the abject poverty that drives the youth to the city, she still believes that it is up to the individual's choice to fall victim to the dehumanizing conditions in the city. The city policeman blames Nozipho after she is severely assaulted by her boyfriend:

Nc, nc, nc, nc, mantombazana akithi, kungani liziphatha ngaloluhlobo?  
Kusobala kimi ukuthi nxa kunje nje liyabe livuna umvuzo welakuhlanyelayo (71).

Oh, pity you our young women, why do you behave in this manner? It is obvious to me that when you are beaten like this you are reaping what you sowed.

There is no sympathy for the young women who have been reduced by poverty and deprivation to prostitution. They are portrayed as morally weak characters

that are greedy for ill-gotten money. Such a portrayal of women was in line with the colonial policy and practice that relegated African women to the poverty-stricken rural areas. African women who ventured into the city were therefore perceived as rebellious and immoral. Such presumptions were oblivious to the empty and debilitating conditions in the countryside that forced both men and women to seek employment under the harsh and hostile socio-economic climate of urban areas.

### **Makhala's didacticism - the triumph of good over evil**

The writer has shown her readers two kinds of young women: first, there is the type of Lulu and Nozipho who are prepared to sleep with any man as long as he can pay them and, second, there is the rare type represented by Sibonile. Sibonile is portrayed as a good Christian who manages to uphold her rural innocence in spite of the temptations and challenges of city life. The rural area is perceived as a good and a safe place for women in spite of the deprivation and poverty that its inhabitants experience.

Commenting on the writer's general bias towards what she perceives to be Christian ideals, Ncube (1986:9) says:

Makhala has set out to write with the Christian enterprise in mind and she tends to 'preach' to her readers to be good in order to be accepted in the life hereafter. Her themes tend to affect her characterization in that she becomes so engrossed in bringing out her message at the expense of making her characters real.

This overt 'preaching' by Makhala is explained by the fact that the writer is,

an active, practising Christian and member of Christian organizations herself, she presents Christianity as the most effective cure for broken homes (Veit-Wilde 1992:248).

A similar observation is made by Zozi:

The writer [Makhala] has a strong Christian background and throughout her novels she 'preaches' an eschatological message. Good will always overcome evil and people who hold on fast to Christianity

and practice its teaching are always rewarded (Zozi, no year of publication:11).

It is for this reason that one may claim that the writer was buttressing and pursuing the ideas of the ruling class of the time. Christianity, like most religions, was appropriated by the conqueror's ideology to foster and nurture a servile culture of submission on the part of the colonized.

## Conclusion

The discussion has focused on themes because the overall objective has been the writer's message. It is also of significance to note that the book was written and published during the oppressive colonial regime that watched closely any artistic material meant for consumption by Africans. According to Nkabinde (1990:7), 'the Literature Bureau was established to monitor, from the beginning, the creation and direction of a passive and servile literature'. We also take into consideration the dichotomy between traditional practices and western and Christian beliefs. The story reflects all those realities and contradictions in Ndebele society during colonial rule. The plight and suffering of Africans in general and African women in particular can be explained in terms of the prevailing political economy and the ideology sustaining that system. While Makhalisa describes very well the conditions of urban women then, she however gives the impression that by being a faithful, God-fearing Christian, one could have overcome the oppressive circumstances. It is on that point that the writer's perception becomes problematic as she blames the victims instead of perpetrators of poverty. The hapless urban women are meant to invoke the wrath rather than the sympathy of the reader, except for Sibonile who steadfastly adheres to Christian principles.

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## Rambisai Ruth Kandawasvika-Chivandikwa

### Introduction

This chapter discusses the portrayal of women in the literature published by the Zimbabwe Women Writers (ZWW) as depicted in the Ndebele and Shona short-story anthologies, *Vus' Inkophe* (1996) and *Masimba* (1996), respectively. It focuses on women writers' perceptions of the factors that oppress women as portrayed in the anthologies in question. It critically evaluates these factors and the solutions that the women writers propose in their stories. These works are discussed in the context of womanism, which Ogunyemi (1993:239) defines as,

...a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life while giving a balanced presentation of black womanhood. It concerns itself with black sexual power tussle as with the world power structure that subjugates blacks. Its ideal is for black unity where every black person has modicum power and so can be a brother or sister or father or mother.

This framework emphasizes the transformation of societal institutions for the purpose of encouraging full participation of both men and women in social development, each according to his/her talent and potential. Womanism argues for the humanization of social institutions. This approach is therefore appropriate and relevant to the study of African literature since it seeks the co-operation of the community in liberating women.

### Background of Zimbabwe Women Writers (ZWW)

O. Muchena (1987:65-67) observes that a number of women's organizations were formed after the attainment of political independence as a way of redressing women's marginal position in society. The goal was that through these organizations, women could find channels to develop and express themselves. Zimbabwe Women Writers is one such organization. Formed in 1990, ten years

after the attainment of political independence, its main aim was to provide a platform for women to express their concerns through the use of literary images.

The marginal position of women in society, together with the near absence of female voices on the literary scene, precipitated the formation of the ZWW. By 1989, only 13.04% of Zimbabwean writers of creative works were women. One of the main reasons for this state of affairs, which is also cited by ZWW, is that women exist in a society structured and created by men. This society has excluded them from shaping the forces which impact directly and indirectly on their lives. It should also be noted that the unequal opportunities created by the colonial ideology partly accounts for this anomaly (Elizabeth Schmidt, 1992).

On the other hand, some female writers who were members of Zimbabwe Writers Association, which was male-dominated, found it necessary to form a women writers' organization which would highlight women's concerns, as they felt that their organization lacked seriousness in tackling women's concerns. Some of them also felt uncomfortable discussing women centered issues in a male-dominated organization. These women, together with other interested female writers, began to hold discussions and workshops on women and writing, which culminated in the formation of ZWW in 1990.

To date, with a total membership of over 1000 women, ZWW is one of the few women writers' organizations in Africa. Black women form the majority of the members, with some members like Ama Ata Aidoo, coming from countries as far afield as Ghana. What unites these women, despite their ethnic and racial differences, is their perception of women as 'oppressed', irrespective of race, culture and class.

ZWW also interacts with other writers' organizations like the Budding Writers of Zimbabwe and Zimbabwe Writers Association. During workshops with writers from such organizations, ZWW members try to raise the consciousness of these writers on issues concerning women and how such issues could best be transformed into artistic images.

As already indicated, one of the major objectives of the ZWW is to promote the publication of women's writings. The organization therefore encourages women to also publish their works in newspapers, journals and magazines in order to include the largely excluded female voice on the literary scene. The assumption is that women are oppressed and have not been given platform to air their grievances and aspirations. This chapter therefore tries to

investigate what women perceive to be the factors that oppress them as well as to critically analyze the strategies they adopt as the way forward.

One other objective of ZWW is to promote ‘positive’ images of women. This objective assumes that earlier writers portrayed women in a negative and stereotypical manner. Kennedy Chinyowa (1997) argues that feeding society on stereotypical images of women results in the limiting of women’s potential. Morala Ogundipe-Leslie (1994:61) states that a positive female image is that which tells of being a woman in the complex sense of being one. This entails portraying women as complex social beings whose personalities are defined and determined by their interaction with their environment. The following discussion thus highlights what writers published by ZWW regard to be the major factors that oppress women and their proposals for women’s liberation.

### **Depiction of the marriage institution**

A number of stories in *Vus’Inkophe* and *Masimba* depict the marriage institution as an institution dominated by cultural values and principles that do not allow women to fully realize their potential. One writer in the English *Anthology Number 1* (1994) published by the same organization actually describes it as a prison, an image that implies that the marriage institution is indeed oppressive to women.

In ‘Asihambe ekhaya mintakwethu’ (Let’s go home my friend), the writer narrates a story of a woman called Noma, who is married to Khoza. Her husband does not appreciate his family and thus abdicates his role as a father. He spends his time and money with his many girlfriends. This adversely affects the children who become ill-disciplined at school. When Noma tries to speak to him, he refuses to pay attention. Xoli, Noma’s friend, also finds herself in a similar situation. All this leads to great emotional and psychological stress. Similarly, in ‘Bedzapfuma’ (Wanton abuser of family wealth), a woman emotionally narrates how her husband abuses her. To these writers, the marriage institution is bedeviled by oppressive values, as it does not allow women to fully express themselves. It is also interesting to note that the *English Anthology Number 1* also carries a number of stories, for instance, ‘African woman’ and ‘Married to suffer’, which highlight the view postulated above.

The stories have detailed descriptions of how married women are abused by their husbands, which is testimony to the fact that the writers view marriage as an institution which is unfavourable for the full realization of women’s potential. One could say their effort is commendable in so far as it

initiates discussion surrounding the challenges that the marriage institution poses to women. The stories, however, are not clear as to the source of marital problems and how women could overcome these problems. Like their characters, the authors seem to be at a loss.

Some stories like 'Bedzapfuma' view divorce as a solution to the hardships that married women endure. Whilst this might sound like a viable solution, it does not address the source of the problems that bedevil the marriage institution. Writers seem to be dealing with symptoms of problems rather than identifying the underlying causes. The appropriate solution from a womanist point of view would be to humanize the institution and make it conducive for the survival of the family (Ogunyemi, 1993:239).

While some authors suggest divorce as the solution to marital problems, others highlight problems associated with divorce and the attendant challenges of single-motherhood. Some of these problems are depicted in Virginia Phiri's 'Ndangariro dzepfambi' (Memories of a prostitute), Valeria Chaukura's 'Waiti zvichazodii? (What would be the end result?)' and 'Uhlupho ludlisa amanyala' (Problems often demean people) by Virginia Phiri. In 'Ndangariro dzepfambi', Daisy, the main character, is persecuted by her husband because of her barrenness. This leads to divorce. She then faces many difficulties and ends up engaging in prostitution to make ends meet. Daisy hints at the problems faced by divorced women:

'Kushaya mberekon diko kwakandiparira' (122).

Barrenness is the source of my problems.

The word *kundiparira* suggests that the woman is in a very undesirable situation. The difficulties that she comes across force her into prostitution, a life that is described in the story as soulless and devoid of human feelings. Sex becomes business as opposed to a fulfilling experience.

Mothers, for instance, Mai Maidei in 'Waiti zvichazodii ?' by Valeria Chaukura, become prostitutes to earn a living for their children. Each time people question her behaviour, her answer is, 'Vana vangu vanoda kupona' (I have to fend for my children) (160). Prostitution, just like divorce, is a symptom of a much bigger problem. It should be noted, however, that the writers try to show that women who become prostitutes are mere victims of harsh socio-economic conditions.

From a womanist point of view, one would expect to find ways of humanizing such an important institution, in order for it not to allow the abuse of women. The stories, however, do not seem to suggest any solution. As has been indicated, the artist, it seems, is at a loss as to what values could make the family a better institution. Therefore, like stories that encourage divorce, these stories remain at the level of observable facts. The works do not show the underlying historical and cultural forces that shape individual behaviour. The writers do not give insights into the factors or forces that would bring about a new society which would, in turn, release the potentialities of both women and men within the marriage institution. What they emphasize is that women should fight for their rights. How they fight for these rights is not clear in their works. This becomes an individual solution as opposed to a collective one.

It is crucial to note that as long as their programmes of action remain at the personal and individual levels, ZWW's contribution to the struggle for women's liberation will remain largely ineffective. The stories should shift from being merely descriptive to show the historical and social processes that have shaped the relations between men and women. It is within these processes that the organization will emerge with a vision of a society with institutions that respect the humanity of both men and women.

### **Male dominance and their patronizing attitude**

Related to the marriage institution is the problem of male dominance and a general patronizing attitude as factors that oppress women both within and outside the marriage institution. The stories imply that for as long as men have a superiority complex, women will never be liberated.

'Indoda yindoda' (Men will always be men) is the story of a man called Findo who grows up in a society which views women as children. Findo carries these ideas into his marriage and does not value his wife's contribution in the family, or respect her views on any matter. For example, he frequents beer-drinking outlets but does not inform his wife of his whereabouts. He also does not heed her pleas that he should come home early for his own safety. Eventually, the wife and Findo's sister decide to teach him a lesson. They plan that the wife should go somewhere without telling Findo. Eventually, when she turns up, her aunt asks her why she does not inform her husband about her whereabouts when each time he goes out he informs her of his whereabouts. This irony calms him down and makes him realize the need to change his attitude towards his wife.

One could deduce that the idea informing these stories is that women's problems within the marriage institution emanate from men's superiority complex. One interesting point raised in the story in question is that socialization plays a very crucial role in shaping one's attitude towards life. The writer could therefore be implying that the same process could give birth to men who respect women. The writer is, however, not very clear as to what culture informs the kind of environment in which Findo grows up. This makes it very difficult to understand the underlying factors informing his behaviour.

Male dominance, particularly within the household, is sometimes demonstrated through actual physical violence. In 'Bedzapfuma', Fungai is beaten up by her husband when she discovers that he is having an affair with the housemaid. Her husband's behaviour is a way of silencing her. In 'Hundi kwandiri' (Chuff is all I get), Netsai's husband holds her responsible for the elopement of their daughter and assaults her severely until she loses consciousness. These stories advance the view that physical and emotional abuse is a form of male domination that inhibits women's potential to contribute meaningfully to social development. The detailed description of acts of violence and the emotive language used to describe them bear testimony to the authors' anger against these acts. It is such acts of violence against women that have led to the formation of organizations such as Musasa Project, which seeks to find ways of curbing all forms of violence against women.

The stories discussed so far give us observable facts and events. This detail by itself does not amount to artistic truth. Artistic truth can only be reached when discussed in the context of history and culture, that is, when presented with all their connectedness to the life process. It is within this process that conflicts are fought and resolved. To write that there is domestic violence in the family is to state what everyone perhaps knows or has experienced at one time or the other. In addition, to explain this violence in terms of men's negative attitude and lack of respect for women is to argue that men come into this world as finished products and therefore are unchangeable. It is therefore important for women writers to critically examine the problems within the African family in the context of history.

A notable dimension of these stories is the creation of stereotypical male images. For instance, male characters in the stories are reckless, cruel, promiscuous and liars. The authors also seem to imply that these characteristics are inherent or inborn. If this were so, then women would have lost their struggles for liberation before they have even started waging them. To argue

that men are by nature reckless and irresponsible would imply that efforts to change their behaviour and attitude would be a futile exercise. The male characters in the stories are therefore not typical characters under typical circumstances. This reflects Stratton's (1984:154) observation that the creation of stereotypical male characters has become a trend in African women's fiction. In a bid to try and deconstruct the stereotypical female images created by earlier writers, women writers end up creating male characters that are not typical under given circumstances.

'Ndiniwo here?' (Could this be me?) by Precity Mabuya gives another dimension to the aspect of male dominance as a factor that oppresses women. A woman who is a teacher by profession sacrifices her job to support her husband's transfer to Bulawayo as a result of a promotion. She fortunately finds a job as a secretary for the United Nations Development Agency. As fate would have it, she gets promoted too and is transferred to Zambia. This time she needs the support of her husband, but she fails to get it. The husband, putting his ego ahead of his wife's promotion, invokes MaSandi's role as a wife to discourage her from taking up the promotion. He goes on to use the family as an excuse, although what is at stake here is his ego. His behaviour is in line with E. Batezat and Mwalo's (1994:54) view that male control over women in the household is still a barrier to women's effective participation in the work places and in the public arena. The author suggests that jealousy and selfishness are the root causes for the husband's failure to appreciate his wife's promotion. The husband also concludes that the promotion was not given to her on merit but as a special favour. By making the husband ask questions associating women with stereotypical roles of mother and wife, the writer seeks to illustrate that men have been socialized not to see women as individuals with their own needs, dreams and ideals outside the family.

The issue takes a different turn when MaSandi accepts the promotion, including the transfer. The social and cultural arguments made by her husband do not deter her from realizing her dreams. In so doing, she does not reject her social roles and responsibility. She respects her society's institutions and is prepared to operate within them as long as that society realizes that she should be allowed to contribute fully to its well-being. Therefore, society should not curtail her potential on the basis of men's fear or jealousy. The underlying argument from a womanist point of view, which seems to be the writer's position, is that for social institutions to allow women to contribute to family and society's well-being according to their talents and capabilities, they should be

exorcized of men's desire to control women (Ogunyemi 1993:240). As already indicated, MaSandi is not against the institutions and socially prescribed gender roles. She criticizes the value that men accord themselves within these institutions, that is, the value they attach to manhood. What she calls for is respect for the individual, whether male or female.

The story also seems to suggest that within the family, women should strive to make their male counterparts understand that women can contribute meaningfully to social development and therefore complement men's efforts. To do so effectively, the author invites the contribution of enlightened men to educate those men who do not understand what women are struggling to achieve. Hence, it is after the intervention of his male work-mates that Mhlophe changes his attitude and appreciates what his wife intends to do. The author could be calling for the formation of organizations such as *Padare*, which was formed by Zimbabwean men in the mid-nineties with the major objective of sensitizing men on the importance of women's liberation. It is therefore clear that both men and women should work towards humanizing the family institution. Another interesting dimension of this story is that men are social beings and can therefore change their attitude provided that enough effort is made to change the status quo. This insight makes the story more convincing as it tries to portray both women and men as products of socio-cultural and economic forces.

### **Ignorance of the law**

Some stories seem to indicate that ignorance of the law or ignorance of one's rights plays a part in the oppression of women. The law is thus perceived as a tool that can liberate women. 'Kodzero' (Rights) by Mary Tandon begins with women discussing their experiences at the work place. Susan, a young female lawyer, is told of how Shupikai has been demoted from being a foreperson to a general hand because she is pregnant. Susan describes this act as a form of gender discrimination. She tells Shupikai and the rest of the women that they should know their rights and fight for them. The story ends with a chorus:

Tinofanira kuziva kodzero dzedu  
Tisati tarwira kodzero dzedu (66).

We should know our rights

Before we start fighting for them.

The story thus provides a manifesto and its key ingredients are that women should know their rights and demand respect.

Similarly, in 'Inguquko' (Change), Nina, a male character becomes a women's rights activist after attending a number of workshops on gender issues. When he gets back to his village he invites all the women for a meeting where he educates them about their rights. He also emphasizes that women should take leadership positions and participate in decision making at all levels. He also informs them that they should resist a society that treats them like children and should also resist being confined only to domestic chores. The women who attend this meeting begin to sing songs that indicate that they need change. The local chief is receptive to the new ideas though a few men resist. Nina is then given a gift by the women for bringing development to their community.

'Inguquko' and 'Kodzero' could be suggesting that once women have knowledge of their rights, they become empowered. Okerere (1997:28) reiterates the same principle when she states that raising women's consciousness towards their rights is an important step in the struggle for women's liberation. While raising women's consciousness towards their rights is crucial to their liberation, it is rather simplistic to assume that the knowledge of these rights on its own will necessarily empower women to fight for these rights. It is also problematic that it is a man who initiates change on behalf of women, and that ideas about women's rights come from outside the community. This could result in the marginalization of women in the fight for their own empowerment. Furthermore, from a womanist point of view, there is need for the writers to depict the term 'rights' as a complex aspect that entails responsibilities and privileges, which individuals are expected to perform and be granted, respectively.

The two stories also draw attention to the importance of collective effort among women. This is clearly depicted in 'Kodzero,' where the women who have gathered for the social event promise to support Shupikai if she decides to question her superiors. The author could be encouraging women to form organizations or groups that act as support groups in order to enable them to fight for their liberation.

The use of the law to fight against oppression is also raised in the story 'Kushinga kwaMai Sifelani' (Mai Sifelani's resilience), where women are urged to make use of the legal system in matters of inheritance and property ownership. This same issue is raised in the film production *Neria*. The writer assumes that the legal institution provides a platform for women's liberation, hence knowledge of it is power. While it is commendable that women should

know the law, to assume that it can solve women's social problems is to be rather naive. For instance, in 'Nzira iripo' (There is a way) by B. Ncube, the same legal system becomes a hindrance to MaMkhize who, despite owning a farm, fails to obtain a loan because she is customarily but not legally married. This may be an indication that the law can be an equally retrogressive factor to some women. Hence, there is need for the writers to critically assess the law rather than assume that it is always a liberating tool.

## Culture

A number of stories indicate that Ndebele and Shona customs, practices and beliefs are archaic and oppressive to women. Inheritance is one such practice.

In the story 'Waiti zvichazodii?' (What would have been the desired end?) by Valeria Chaukura, Mai Maidei refuses to have her husband's brother inherit her, as dictated by the widow inheritance custom. As a result, she is chased away from the home that she and her husband built and ends up a prostitute in a farming area. In the end, she and her children become destitute. This same custom is the focus of attack in the story 'Please say yes' in the *English Anthology No. 1*.

The stories assume that African culture is oppressive to women. To begin with, 'Waiti zvichazodii?' does not give us a typical example of how *kugarwa nhaka* (widow inheritance) functions. It depicts Shona culture as condoning the greed of surviving male relatives in the event of a husband's death. The story ignores the fact that Shona society has supportive structures whose major objective is to take care of widows and orphans. The writer's depiction of a woman who is dragged into accepting what she does not want, only to run away as a solution, is not at all typical. What the writer gives us as typical is actually an abuse of custom. Traditionally, a widow is not forced to accept marriage to any of the husband's surviving relatives. The choice is entirely hers, and she is even allowed to choose her son or her aunt as the *chisarapavana*, (One who takes charge of the welfare of the children after the death of their father). In some instances, with the approval of the widow, this same custom could address the physical needs of the widow. Therefore the physical and emotional needs of widows like Mbuya Muswa in 'Munhu wenyama' (Man of flesh) could be catered for by such a custom. The writer does not seem to fully understand the custom and its significance in Shona culture. Furthermore, since each culture is dynamic, the same custom could be 'adapted' to suit the present-day Zimbabwe.

Another custom under attack is that of *chimutsamapfihwa*, that is, the resurrection of an expired marriage. ‘Muraramisi wangu’ (My saviour) portrays a hard working Grade five girl student called Farai. She keeps a diary in which she documents how the male members of her family decided to give her away to her dead aunt’s husband as a wife. A female teacher rescues Farai using the law to annul this arrangement. The author perceives this custom as an infringement on women’s rights, and that it should therefore be dealt with in the context of modern law as a criminal offense. The author could be highlighting that the law is very important in the liberation of women of all ages. She, however, avoids discussing the principles behind *chimutsamapfihwa* and why such a practice was put in place. This gives a distorted picture of the custom, and is also a simplistic criticism of the principles that it represents.

In ‘Angimfuni’ (I do not love him), Dadela decides to flee to South Africa to escape being forced to marry a barren sister’s husband. Her parents and relatives literally drag her into this plan, prompting her to run away from home. The focus of the attack is the African custom of *ukulamuza/chiramu* (Sexual banter). It is clear that the writer regards this as forced marriage. As mentioned earlier on, the writer does not give us insights into the principles that were upheld by this custom.

## Conclusion

This chapter has discussed factors that oppress women as portrayed by women writers published by ZWW, as well as the strategies that the writers propose as tools for women’s liberation. The majority of the stories revolve around the marriage institution. They highlight the need to transform the family institution by humanizing it so that it enables both women and men to contribute fully to social development, each according to his or her ability.

It has also been observed that most of the stories emphasize observable phenomena or surface reality at the expense of complex socio-economic, cultural and historical forces that shape human behaviour. This amounts to nothing more than critical realism that results in simplistic solutions to complex human problems.

According to F. Stratton (1994:174), the creation of stereotypical male images has become a trend in African women’s fiction. Eustace (1993:44) also argues that most women writers portray exaggerated male images. The creation of such images is what Stratton refers to as ‘inversion’. This is an inadequate strategy because it replicates and hence reinstates the oppressive structure.

This inversion does not resolve the problems of gender in Africa. Its effect is to imprison one section of society, while liberating the other (Stratton, *ibid*:994). There is need therefore, for women writers to portray typical male characters in typical circumstances and move towards a more realistic depiction of both female and male characters.

The women writers discussed in this chapter demonstrate a lack of deep understanding of Shona and Ndebele cultures. Their analysis of cultural customs such as *chimutsamapfihwa*, *kugarwa nhaka* and inheritance lack depth, as they do not give insights into the principles that govern these customs. In some cases, they depict the cultural forms in their abused form, as typical. One can therefore argue that they interpret these customs through the lenses of western ethnographers and anthropologists who have always considered African culture as oppressive.

Although ZWW can be applauded for adding women's voices onto Zimbabwe's literary scene, there is, however, need for women writers to grapple with the complex nature of women's liberation in the context of African cultures.

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Rudo Barbara Gaidzanwa

## Introduction

Women's writing in Zimbabwe has been influenced by the colonial history of the country and the gendered opportunities for writing, controlled by the colonial and post-independence systems of education. As indicated in Gaidzanwa (1985), literature in Zimbabwe throughout colonization had to be non-political to be published within the country. Colonized men's writings were more prominent because of the male-domination of the colonial order, as well as the patrilineal nature of colonial societies. The material advantages accruing to black men developed their writing skills better than those of black women, resulting in the publication of significantly more men's works than those of women.

Literate black men dominated the presentation and representations of the black people of Zimbabwe, giving the man higher credibility than women and other groups in the literary field. Schooled men such as Solomon Mutswairo, Bernard Chidzero, Patrick Chakaipa, Charles Mungoshi and Ndabezinhle Sigogo, wrote about the black experience in colonial Zimbabwe. In addition, there was some distortion or absence of black women's and poorer, illiterate men's voices on life's experiences under colonialism and after independence. Literate black women also presented partial views of the reality of life as black people since they too, had life experiences shaped by their class, gender, racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Earlier writings of black women published before Zimbabwe's independence demonstrate a heavy and Christianized presentation and representation of life. Christian missions run by Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans and other denominations dominated the education system of black people. Racist colonial governments spent the bulk of their education budgets on white people, leaving the education of black people to the mission schools. The structures of colonial life, based on gendered divisions of labour which assigned skilled work to whites and unskilled labour to blacks, drew black men into labour migrancy in the towns, mines and farms that comprised the bedrock of the colonial economy. Black women remained in the labour-intensive

subsistence agricultural economy or unskilled commercial farm labour, where they were deemed to need very little education to function efficiently.

In common with other African experiences described by Labode (1993) and Comaroff and Comaroff (1992), mission education in Zimbabwe focused on evangelizing and 'civilizing' women, teaching them home making and mothering skills, nursing and other service skills perceived to be important by the missionaries. It must be noted that at colonization, black women were chiefly involved in agriculture, trade and other pursuits outside the home because home making was not as important for subsistence farmers whose partial dependence on plant and animal husbandry precluded their confinement to the home. The male migrancy characterizing the settler colonies of Southern Africa and the focus on domestic skills for women in the colonized communities in Zimbabwe effectively shifted gender divisions of labour, reducing African women's economic independence. The institutionalization of converted women in boarding schools was intended to remove African women from their 'primitive' environments perceived by missionaries to be plagued by forced marriages for women and girls, witchcraft accusations and practices, ancestor worship, killing of twins and other barbaric practices.

Labode (1993) describes the curriculum for African women as focused on grooming wives as helpmates for black Christian men. While male Africans could be trained to lead Christian and heathen natives, native women were supposed to bear children and raise them in a fit manner for these leaders. It was felt that academic education 'spoiled' native women. There were exceptions to these general practices as pointed out by Ranger (1995) in his account of the Methodist Samkange family of Zimbabwe. The Samkanges desired higher education for both their sons and daughters. There were similar families in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and other British colonies as attested by the accounts of Labode (1993), Kanogo (1993) and Isichei (1993). Needless to say, the dominance of the home making education model for African women, delayed their acquisition of literary skills and narrowed their possibilities to write about their experiences of living in colonized and independent Africa. It was only the few African women who were teachers, nurses, nuns and welfare workers, who developed literacy skills and acquired public voices to articulate the experiences of black women as they perceived them. It was women such as Sharai Mukonoweshuro, Barbara Makhala and Lenah Mazibuko who were associated with the literary business, who had a voice in the colonial era. Poor

and illiterate women spoke on other fora and participated in orature that was not based on writing.

Since black men articulated the black Zimbabwean experience to the rest of the world through writing, it was inevitable that the black female experience was coloured by black men's perceptions of women. Educated black men tended to take a predominantly Christianized and/or male-dominated view of women given the mission education of the majority of black men. As has been argued by Davies and Graves (1986), Gaidzanwa (1985) and others, the need for black solidarity in the face of racist colonialism, resulted in the idealization of black women to the world as part of the struggle for national liberation. Authors such as Patrick Chakaipa, a staunch Catholic, wrote fictional accounts of men and women whereby women were idealized as long-suffering, self-denying mothers, wives and helpmates for men. In this depiction, Chakaipa is not alone since throughout Africa, writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiongo and Jomo Kenyatta, idealized African womanhood. Kenyatta contributed to the field of anthropology in his work *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), in which he extolled the virtues of pre-colonial Gikuyu family and kinship, and defended the practice of female genital mutilation as essential for family cohesion.

While wifehood and motherhood had been expressed in the peasant context of agricultural labour, animal husbandry, trade and other activities, the Christian version, premised on black women's domesticity, became quite problematic for black women. Black women with education could become wives and mothers to educated black men, and could only write under conditions of colonial domesticity if they were able to hire domestic labour to free themselves from housework and childcare. Their supporting roles as clergy wives, teachers, nuns and nurses did not present opportunities for writing since they would need to spend their time outside domestic chores on outreach activities intended to 'civilize' the native women. As teachers and nurses, they had better opportunities to write, but this would only be possible if they did not marry, have children and have responsibility for domestic chores. Thus, class, marital status and age influenced the capacity and opportunities of black women to write.

Even those women who could write had to contend with the idealized versions of womanhood, confined mainly to motherhood and wifehood. While colonization created opportunities for black women to escape from involuntary wifehood and motherhood through forced marriages, it was not socially

acceptable amongst Africans and the colonialists for women generally, to eschew wifehood and motherhood. Only Catholicism and African traditional beliefs provided scope for, and approved of a few women opting out of motherhood and wifehood to serve a god or become mediums of spirits. African and European women were generally expected to marry, have children and be good, obedient wives to their husbands. Thus, in colonial Zimbabwe, black and white communities looked askance at uncoupled adult women and men who tended to be perceived to be possessed by spirits, odd, eccentric, immoral or just plain bad.

In this context, both men and women who were able to write tended to focus on uplift type messages, extolling the virtues of good Africans, good men and good women while decrying any type of African that could compromise the credibility of black people and their struggles for national liberation. This explains why, in the pre-independence literature, transgressive black people, particularly women, were not idealized. Rudo Gaidzanwa (1985) has described how both men and women, writing prior to independence, tended to develop stereotypic characters of women- the good and the bad. Ndebele and Shona language literature by Ndabezinhle Sigogo (1974), Agrippa Masiye (1974), Patrick Chakaipa (1966) and Aaron Moyo (1977), exemplifies this genre. Women writings during this time were not immune to this tendency as the writings by Mukonoweshuro (1979) and Mandebvu (1974) show. It was only, after independence when colonial censorship was discontinued, that a broader range of literature emerged and was published within Zimbabwe. This justifies why this chapter focuses on the literature by women writers in Zimbabwe in order to show the continuities and changes in the literature by women since independence.

This chapter is based on an analysis of Shona and Ndebele women's writings contained in two short-story anthologies published by the Zimbabwe Women Writers in 1996. Some of the stories are translated and appear in both anthologies. The stories present issues as diverse as citizenship laws, the problems of registering and entering orphaned children into registered institutions, HIV/AIDS, infidelity between couples, war veterans' predicaments and their lives after the war, marriage and its problems, raising children, prostitution, poverty and destitution, sexual abuse and homosexuality. These stories are by turns refreshing, funny, frustrating, annoying, uplifting and exasperating. They describe diverse ways in which women look at, and live in

the world, and they are very appropriate for the purpose of examining continuities and changes in the ways in which women write about the world.

## The concerns of women writers

An analysis of the stories in these anthologies shows a variety of concerns as shown in the preceding paragraph. In addition, women writers show concern about citizenship rights, women's vulnerability to infection, the trauma married women suffer if they fail to conceive, widowhood and related disadvantages of both emotional and material insecurity. They also explore the problems of standing up for rights and different forms of freedom.

There is a broad range of authorial voices and protagonist stances on these issues. Some women take a straight and didactic moral stance on issues, while others tend to explore the reasons behind women's behaviours such as prostitution, adultery, alcohol abuse and drunkenness. Some women authors poke fun at women while others cast them as architects of their own misery. The variety of stances affirms the abilities of women to showcase their differences and also to deal even with difficult issues such as HIV/AIDS, homosexuality, women's transgressions and vanities, and perseverance in the face of difficulties. The stories differ from those of the previous era of colonialism where women were afraid of, or not allowed to look at, defend, tolerate, explain or condone many behaviours considered by men to be unseemly for women to preoccupy themselves with.

## Uplift stories

Uplift stories are those with an overt and liberal self-improvement message exhorting women to pursue and fight for their legal rights to inherit property, fair treatment in the work place, attend school and to access loans, mortgages and other services in their society. Tandon in 'Sezadlula lezonsuku' (Those days are now history) and 'Ukumela ilungelo lakho'/'Kodzero', (Standing up for your rights), Nozwelo Dube in 'Vukuzenzele' (Do it yourself), 'Kushinga kwaMai Sifelani' (Mai Sifelani's resilience), Beauty Ncube in 'Nzira iripo' (There is a way)/ 'Ngizakhwinca izidwaba' (I will fight), Barbara Makhalisa in 'Kayisimandlwane' (This is not child's play) and Chitehwe in 'Kufundisa mwana' (Educating a child) exemplify this genre. These stories are a result of the opening up of public life for women in post-independence Zimbabwe, and the passing of enabling legislation that protects women's and children's rights. The stories emphasize the need to work hard in life and to stand up for oneself in the face

of difficulties. They encourage women not to take shortcuts or to be too dependent on others, and to be there for their children through support for schooling and in family disputes. The vulnerable women in these stories tend to be widows or poor women and girls with little education who have to attend school to better themselves, or to work in the wage or informal sector to support themselves. In general, these stories support women who are perceived to be vulnerable and deserving and who do not indulge in socially questionable behaviours. Thus, 'deviant' women such as sex workers, divorcees, single mothers and adulterous women do not feature much in these stories except to illustrate how vulnerable deviant women are in Zimbabwe and to enjoin women to eschew deviant behaviours. Therefore, the uplift messages tend to be directed to 'safe' women, and this approach shows some continuity with pre-independence or first generation literature by women in Zimbabwe.

Uplift stories appeal to women of the middle classes who are employed and usually involved in associational activities. Uplift stories and activities are safe for both the writers and protagonists because they do not disrupt social norms, especially those that are dear to men and other women who tread the socially acceptable roads. While these stories are encouraging for some women, they steer clear of those issues that are socially controversial and they continue to silence and demonize those men and women who are perceived to be socially unacceptable. The uplift genre tends not to consider the limitations of uplift efforts especially in the absence of significant legal aid for poor women, girls and boys. Other limitations include high prices of books and the absence of libraries in the poor communities of Zimbabwe, the impact of HIV/AIDS on women's and girls' attempts to protect their virtue and also inadequate manpower needed to uplift the 75% of Zimbabweans living in absolute poverty. Thus, while uplift literature may give voice to some women, the concerns of these women may also mirror their interests and avoid going off the beaten track to explore people, issues and activities that are socially skirted. Such literature may also underestimate the magnitude of problems faced by poor men and women, casting social problems as individual issues that can be resolved through concerted individual uplift effort and strength of volition.

### **Virtuous and bad women**

Closely linked to the uplift genre, is the genre in praise of 'virtuous' women. 'Virtuous' women are those women who are subservient to male authority and male domination. They are women who endure and face many difficulties without

getting tempted to deviate or take short cuts to better lives. Such women populate the bulk of Shona and Ndebele literature. The bulk of 'virtuous' women are married and, or widowed, usually with children. These are the women against whom womanhood in Zimbabwe tends to be measured. Bad women are usually presented as foils to good women, to exemplify what happens to a woman who wanders from the path of virtue. A number of stories can be used as examples. Mufute in 'Munhu pasina' (Worthless fellow), Chateuka in 'Chiramu' (Sexual banter), Silitha in 'Dai ndakaziva haitungamiri' (If I had known), Mabuya in 'Hawu bantu benkosi' (Hey, good people), Mlandeli in 'Umvuzo wesono' (The wages of sin) and Nyathi in 'Ngangingazi' (I did not know). These stories present and explore problems that are experienced by school girls who fall pregnant, young single women who have affairs with married men, married women who commit adultery and a woman who has a bad dream in which she is arrested for shoplifting, young women who have affairs with the same married man and a young pretty woman who dies of AIDS because of her promiscuity.

In these stories, there is a simple and straightforward presentation of these bad women as wrong-headed, naive, envious, greedy and shortsighted. These characters tend to be one-dimensional and stereotypic in their badness, and the authors imply that these are naturally bad women who are unable to resist temptation. Literary critics such as Herbert Chimhundu (1987) and sociologists such as Rudo Gaidzanwa (1985) have discussed this approach to the characterization of women in Shona and Ndebele literature. In Mufute's story, the young school girl who is seduced and married by the science master is later neglected by him, bears a child who dies and is left childless and husbandless, without an identity. In Chateuka's story, the young woman who has an affair with her sister's husband is banished from her sister's home, eventually getting pregnant by an aunt's husband, has an abortion and dies from it. The man in the story escapes unpunished while the elder sister, the 'virtuous' wife, confesses that she is not sorry that her younger sister has died, but has nothing to say about her adulterous husband.

In Silitha's story, the adulterous wife with a loving husband falls pregnant by her college lecturer and lover who later ditches her. She commits infanticide, is arrested and shamed in front of her 'virtuous' colleague and her lover runs back to his 'virtuous' wife. The adulterous lecturer goes unpunished and is free to commit adultery again with impunity. In Mabuya's story, the woman who has a bad dream in which she is arrested for shoplifting explains her fears of condemnation and ostracism by her circle of friends. In Mlandeli's

story, the two young women who have affairs with the same married man are both infected with HIV and are likely to die while the young ‘virtuous’ woman who had been wrongfully denied her promotion by the two promiscuous women is re-instated and promoted. In Nyathi’s story, the young pretty woman with AIDS is also in the throes of death, having ignored the advice of her presumably ‘virtuous’ friends, relatives and neighbours.

In their attempts to present and represent lack of virtue in women, sometimes the authors overdraw the flaws in their characters and simplify issues to the point where the characters lose their credibility. For example, in Mufute’s story, it is never clarified whether the science master is married. Why does the science master neglect the school girl after marrying her? Is he just a bad man who has taken advantage of a morally weak school girl? Similarly, in Chateuka’s story, the motives of the younger sister who has affairs with her elder sister’s and aunt’s husbands are not clear.

While in the first generation Shona and Ndebele literature, bad women were presented simply as bad and blamed for it, in the two anthologies under analysis, even in those instances where women are depicted as bad people, the men involved with them tend to be more boldly drawn and characterized in attempts to give them more credibility in the stories.

### **Neutralizing bad men**

There is a large number of stories with characters of bad men who are guilty of a variety of misdeeds. For example, Chitehwe writes one story about a lazy man who refuses to pay school fees for his children. Doris Dube writes about a trucker husband who is believed to have infected his wife with HIV. Beauty Ncube writes about a shiftless father who tries to ease his work burden by taking his daughter out of school and marrying her off to a polygamous man. Chirandu writes about a neglectful and inconsiderate son who ruins his widowed mother’s relationship with a widower.

The large number of stories about bad men shows women’s fears about the potential or actual harm that men can do to women in a male-dominated society. While Zimbabwe’s independence has opened up new opportunities for women in the public domain, there is still no equality between men and women in many spheres of everyday life. Men can harm women, but many women cannot retaliate in the same way to harm men. Those women who protest usually do so when their children are threatened. However, in the majority of stories, bad men get away with harming women.

While the theme of the predominantly bad men is inescapable, there is growing complexity in women's depiction of men who are not stereotypically cast as irretrievably bad. These writers explore the motives and reasons for men's bad behaviour. There are some men whose potential for badness is blunted or aborted by their wives' conduct. Mabuya's stories tend to depict men who are amenable to negotiation and are able to come to their senses despite their domineering and chauvinistic ideas and inclinations. Her story, 'Ndiniwo here?/Kambe Yimi?' (Is this me?) is a good example.

Mabuya in 'Dela okwakho' (Give up what belongs to you) presents another story about a woman using a double-barreled surname despite her husband's protests and insistence that she abandons her family name. He also expects her to stop giving material support to her parents because she now has new responsibilities as a married woman. She refuses to do so and insists that she would rather the marriage broke up than put up with his tyranny. He backs down. Makhalisa's story 'Indoda yindoda' (Men will always be men) depicts a similar scenario. Sibanda's story, 'Ndoda bani le?' (What sort of a man is this?), depicts a man lacking in socially approved manhood and masculinity. The message here is that women need to stand up against men's bad ideas and inclinations. Thus, even some bad men are able to desist from the worst behaviours as long as women are willing to check them. Goodness, therefore, is a function of negotiation between couples and people in their relationships. People are not inherently good or bad, but they are able to indulge their worst inclinations if they are presented with space and opportunities to do so.

## Tackling difficult issues about men and women

### Sex work

Issues relating to sex and sexuality that were generally viewed as taboo among women have been accorded space in the new literature generated by women. The stories indicate a shift from the colonial moralistic approach and stereotypical images of women. Phiri, Mabuya, Gabi and Chaukura write about women who get involved in sex work at particular points in their lives. For example, Phiri's story, 'Ndangariro dzepfambi' (Reminiscences of a prostitute) or 'Uhlupho ludlisa amanyala' (Problems can force one to stoop low), told in the sex worker's voice, describes the hardship of sex work. Gabi's story 'UJoyce', explores a similar theme. The stories demonstrate how difficult it is to make moralistic judgements about people at face value.

### **War veterans**

Some stories explore the predicament of war veterans in post-independence Zimbabwe. For example, Ruggedhla's story 'Shungu' (Heart's desires) describes the life of an orphaned female war veteran whose parents had been murdered by Rhodesian soldiers because she had joined the liberation army. On her return, her community shuns her in spite of the sacrifices she made. She becomes depressed and destitute. Chimusoro in 'Esihle kasidleli' (Good people never survive for long) relates the feelings of a young woman mourning her brother who died in a shooting incident on his way to an assembly point at the end of the war for national liberation.

These stories raise questions about the treatment of war veterans by their society. The majority of those who died during the struggle for national liberation did not get respectable burials after the war, while the survivors were traumatized and neglected by the whole society when they could not fit in due to their poor education and war-related psychological problems.

Katerere's story 'Natsa kwawakabva' (Mend your past), explores the abuse, trauma and psychological harm wreaked on female war veterans during the war of national liberation. Mabuya's story 'Lezonsuku' (Those days) describes the dilemmas faced by villagers during the same war. Female villagers were particularly vulnerable as they experienced violence from both the Rhodesian soldiers and the freedom fighters.

While the uplift stories focus on helping women and children in distress, there is very little understanding amongst the socially upright about the depth and variety of vulnerability amongst poor men, women and children. The stories also bring into question the basis of the discrimination against sections of the vulnerable by indicating the human and likeable qualities of sex workers and war veterans. These are just ordinary people in difficult circumstances, who are born and raised in ordinary families. Society needs a more sympathetic approach in handling the problems of these vulnerable groups.

### **Solidarity and friendships between women**

The most notable stories about women's friendship are 'Asihambe ekhaya mntakwethu (Let's go home my friend) by Elizabeth Ncube wherein she describes an adulterous man who is callous towards his wife and also neglects his children. The wife is supported by a friend who takes her mind off the worst of her problems. Ruggedhla's 'Shungu', (Heart's desire) also describes the solidarity between a destitute female war veteran and a female vegetable vendor.

Makhalisa's 'Angisumgelo wemfucumfucu (I am not a dumping ground) shows the loyalty and solidarity of an unemployed young woman with her older sister when she resists the sexual advances of her brother-in-law in exchange for a job.

Makhalisa's 'Uchandoshopera'/'Qondani emhlahllo' (Seek the services of a traditional healer) also touches on the support a mother-in-law expresses for her daughter-in-law's stance regarding HIV testing for the latter's daughter who desires marriage. This story breaks the usual mould in that it portrays inter-generational solidarity between women, especially a daughter-in law and mother-in-law who traditionally are expected to be competitive with each other.

Women's friendships loom large in many stories by and about women. As indicated earlier, this provides a contrast to most respectable women who compete against each other through and over children's achievements, husbands and material possessions. In the stories, specific kinds of vulnerable women are not accorded much empathy or understanding because they have gone beyond the boundaries of respectability. In the writings by women, militant and socially insubordinate women pay the highest price in society. Women who went to war and those who are sexually transgressive are the most severely punished and ignored even by uplift activists.

### **Women, men and HIV/AIDS**

Women writers have taken it upon themselves to initiate debate on social and health challenges like the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Writers who deal with HIV/AIDS are Virginia Phiri, Barbara Makhalisa, Nyathi, Doris Dube and Mlandeli. As mentioned earlier, Phiri writes in 'Ndangariro dzepfambi'/'Uhlupho ludlisa amanyala' about a childless, divorced woman who has drifted into sex work. The story explores her thoughts and fears about life and the threat of HIV/AIDS. As she prepares to attend the funeral of her friend who has died of AIDS, she contemplates leaving sex work. Makhalisa's story 'Uchandoshopera'/'Qondani emhlahllo' carries a message about HIV testing before sexual contact, told in the form of a scolding administered by a grandmother to her granddaughter who refuses to listen to her mother's advice about finding out as much as possible about a man before making a marriage commitment to him. Nyathi's story 'Ngangingazi' is about a beautiful, promiscuous, single, young woman who contracted AIDS through her sexual activities. This story is told in a condemnatory way, implying that the young lady got what she deserved. Mlandeli's story 'Umvuzo wesono' is a straight moralistic story against

promiscuity, adultery and dishonesty. In this story, a married man and his girlfriend are already sick with AIDS and the husband tells his pregnant ‘wife’ that she and her unborn child would most likely die of AIDS too.

In these stories, HIV/AIDS is associated with young single women, although in Zimbabwe, the major risk factor for women contracting HIV is marriage. The major form of transmission of HIV is heterosexual sex and married women carry the highest risks since they are less able than single women, to negotiate safer sex. The dominant paradigm when the anthologies were published was that HIV/AIDS was associated with immoral people, namely, uncoupled women, and therefore, decent married women were not at risk.

### **Exploring homosexuality**

Post-independence Zimbabwean women writers have also broadened their themes to explore the subject of homosexuality. Mlandeli in ‘Izimanga ziyenzeka’ (The unbelievable happens) explores new ground in her story of a marriage between a homosexual man and a devout, young, Seventh Day Adventist virgin. In this story, the man marries the young woman in order to pass as a heterosexual male. However, he still wants to conduct a homosexual affair with his lover whom he asks to be best man at his wedding. The young woman is able to secure annulment of the marriage on the grounds of non-consummation and is free to marry again.

This story is told from a heterosexual point of view. The author shows a lot of sympathy for the bride who has been duped. In light of the illegality and criminalization of homosexuality in Zimbabwe, it is clear that heterosexuals have little understanding of homosexuality, which remains closeted by and large. It is a sexual orientation that is never openly discussed even in the face of HIV/AIDS. Parents, families and friends of homosexual people and many homosexuals themselves do not know how to deal with the phenomenon, especially since it is criminalized.

The irony in the story is that the devoutness of the woman and her emphasis on saving her physical virginity for her husband on their wedding night makes it difficult for her to discover his sexual orientation. It is not very clear why the homosexual men inject themselves with drugs that smell strongly whenever they have sex. Does the author associate drug abuse with homosexuality? Does the author have to make them drug abusers as well as homosexuals to make the story credible and to demonstrate their deviance? The bride’s father hates her daughter’s husband and calls him a dog, the same

term that President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe used to describe homosexuals. Despite the unanswered questions the reader might have, this is a very intriguing story on many grounds because of the mixed feelings the author has about homosexuals.

### **Women laughing at, and about women**

Another interesting dimension in these writings are some hilarious stories that indicate the confidence that women writers have developed in examining themselves and each other publicly. They can write about women, make fun of them and laugh with them without feeling the need to present women as unmitigated heroines and perfect beings. The funny stories include Grace Dube's 'Ayisinotho' (This is not wealth), Musengezi's 'Emadlodlo' (At Madlodlo), Chateuka's 'Chiroja' (A lodger's experiences) and Hove's 'Baradzanwa' (At parting).

Only two of these will be used to illustrate the point. In 'Ayisinotho', Grace Dube gives voice to a mother of ten children on the occasion of a congratulatory visit by her disapproving younger sister. She intends to call her latest and tenth child, a girl, Drought, because she is born during a year when rains did not fall. All her children have 'talking' and sometimes nonsensical and embarrassing names such as Hlekiso (A figure of fun), because she married when she was considered old and everybody had given up on her ever finding a husband. Her second child is Sinikison (West Nicholson), called after a compound in which her husband had worked for five years. The third is Ntatshana (Small hill) because of his pointed head, delivered with forceps, and resembling a small hill nearby. The eighth is Silingo (Temptation), born during a time of marital discord when the woman considered leaving the marriage and her children. The ninth is Ntombi, (A maiden). The woman is annoyed by her younger sister's implied criticism of her prolific child bearing. She hoped that Sinikisoni would finish school shortly and secure a good job and help support his siblings.

Eventually, the woman agrees to go for tubal ligation when she recognizes that school levies will be required of parents of school-going children and user fees would be levied at public hospitals. In addition, she has heard that youth employment is difficult because of the economic crisis in Zimbabwe. She had already been considering cessation of child bearing but did not want to give her sister the pleasure of congratulating herself for convincing her of the need to stop having children. Her children, Nene and Hlekiso, had already

rebelled against their given names, calling themselves Mandla and Joy instead. She agrees to rename her last child Drought, Sithembile (We are hopeful).

Here, the author makes fun of an unreasonable woman who lumbers her children with names that embarrass them. To their credit, two of the children resist and give themselves names they consider reasonable.

Chateuka's story '*Chiroja*' (A lodger's experiences) describes, through the voice of the lodger's wife, the trials and tribulations of tenancy in a high-density suburb. The protagonist catalogues the embarrassment they have to endure as lodgers. The following instances illustrate some of these demeaning experiences: the interrogation by the landlord about the number of children they have, that they must respect the landlord and his wife as proxy parents who provide accommodation to their children, that they are not allowed to bathe before the landlord even if he is late getting out of bed, and that they must register all their visitors with the landlord or his wife for extra billing for the use of utilities. Even at the beerhall, the lodger has to buy the landlord beer. By and large, the narrator dwells on the avarice and callousness of the landlord and his family.

The story explores the complications of working and living in cities where housing is scarce and expensive. Patriarchal idioms of family, seniority and authority are mobilized to privilege the landlords and their families in situations of economic need.

## Conclusion

The chapter has mapped the history, context and development of women's writing in Zimbabwe. It has argued that literature in the years of colonialism presented a partial view of black people's realities in Zimbabwe. It was dominated by schooled black men, silencing or distorting the perspectives of women's lives which did not accord with the Christian and nationalist views of the reality in colonial Zimbabwe. During this time, women's writing tended to be stilted and morally crusading as a condition of publication.

After independence, the opening up of the public domain and enabling legislation contributed to broadening women's experiences and opportunities in private and public life. Their broader participation facilitated their ability to debate class, gender, age and other issues affecting their lives. They participated in opinion-making and writing, resulting in their production of works of growing complexity, as indicated in this chapter. They have gone beyond issues of the household and women's disabilities in society to a point where they can critique

their own modes of existence, laugh at each other and themselves, protest about discrimination, comment about difficult and socially embarrassing issues, and lead discussions about social change.

The two anthologies that form the basis of this chapter indicate the organized manner in which women approach their writing. There are diverse approaches to issues depending on the women's inclinations and personal politics. Some women decry the social change that has increased competition between men and women, while others revel in and participate in these changes. Some tackle new and difficult issues while others stay with the established concerns. Some approach old issues from new angles while others stay with the old approaches. The result is an interesting mix of challenging, stimulating, exasperating, sad, hilarious and confusing stories. This is as it should be and provides sufficiently stimulating material for a diversity of readers.

The point still remains that writing is still the preserve of literate people with some disposable time. This influences the form, content, themes and concerns expressed in literature. The high literacy in the country, over 90% of the population, is a great advantage for writers in that it has the potential to increase the readership base in Zimbabwe. While books are expensive and people's incomes are relatively low, literate people can make use of libraries and can borrow, lend and pass on books to each other as long as the desire for reading exists. It is the challenge of writers to produce literature that people at different levels will enjoy reading.

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My greatest concern was to determine what had changed, and whether the changes were good or bad. I wanted to know all the details, so I wrote several reports. One report was on the effects of the new legislation on the oil and gas industry. Another report was on the effects of the new legislation on the environment. A third report was on the effects of the new legislation on the economy.

After a year of research, I came up with a report that included a summary of the new legislation, its impact on the oil and gas industry, its impact on the environment, and its impact on the economy.

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## African Womanhood in Zimbabwean Literature - New critical perspectives on Women's Literature in African Languages

expresses a profound desire to search for strategies to empower indigenous Zimbabwean women and also to contribute towards the debate on gender and social inequalities.

The critical examination of literary works by women in the indigenous languages helps to bring the hitherto marginalized Zimbabwean women writers to the centre of literary and cultural discourse. The book shows that direct critical involvement of both female and male in gender discourse goes a long way towards the humanization of social institutions as well as the Zimbabwean society at large. The book also acknowledges that for the African, neither sex can operate independent of the other.



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